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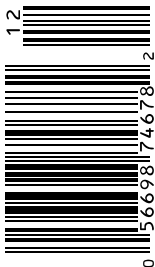


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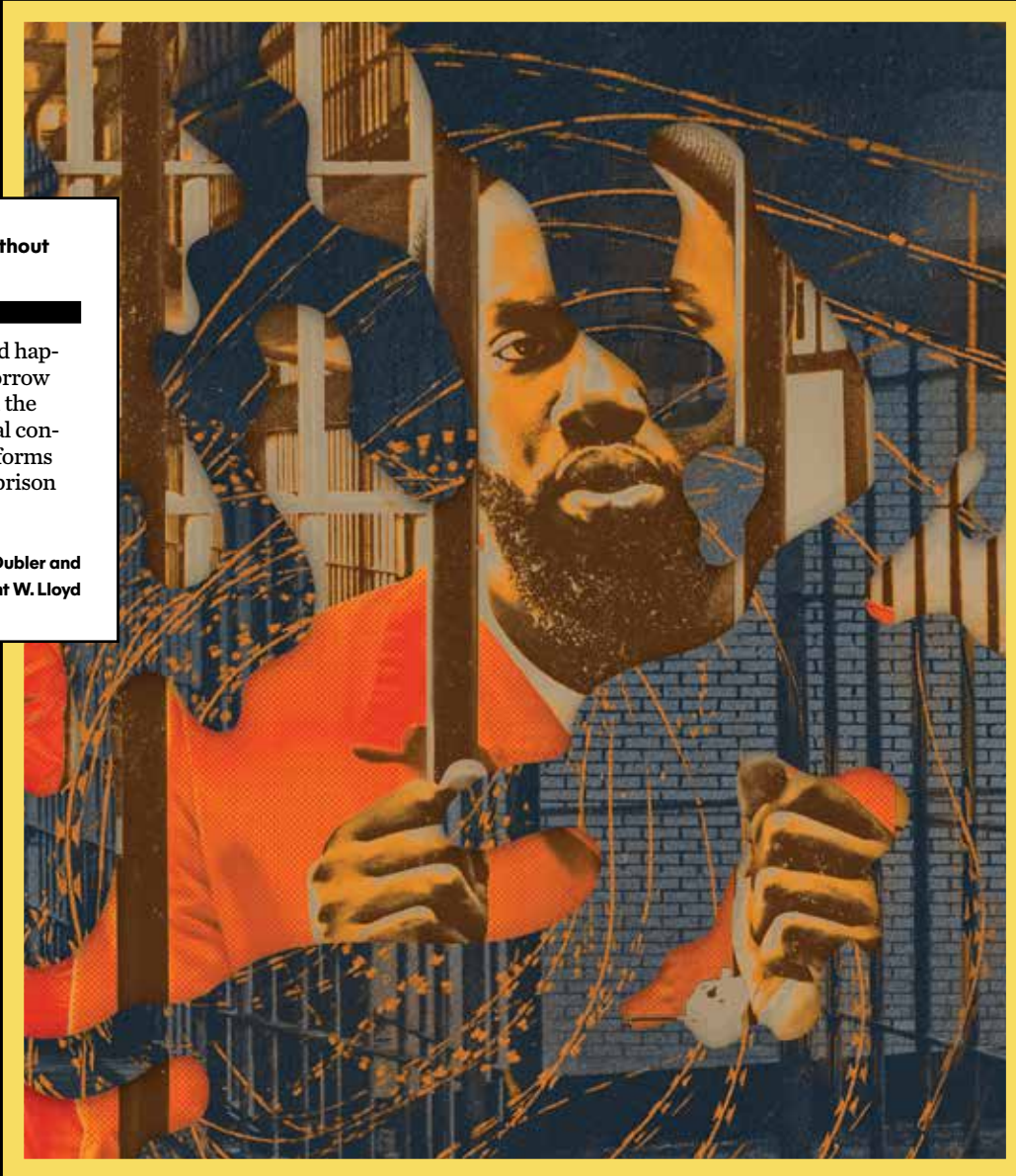
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"MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE CALLS FOR AN EXERCISE IN RADICAL IMAGINATION."

A World Without Prisons

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From the Editor

"Liminal space" refers to that often-disorienting reality of crossing over, when you have left something behind and are not yet fully in something else—the Latin root of the word "liminal" means "threshold."

That between-times spirit imbues everything in this issue of *Sojourners*: It was conceived and written before the election that affects so much about our life in this nation and world and arrives in your hands, presumably, as the results are becoming known. That time lag forces us to look beyond the daily news cycle—as portentous as it may be—and focus on more timeless matters.

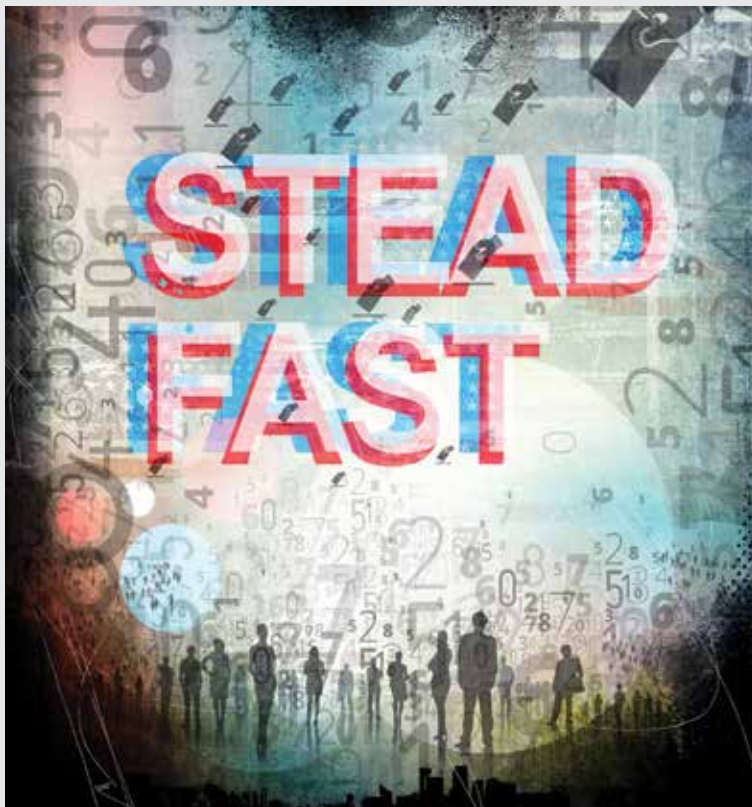
Mercy Amba Oduyoye's consequential work, going back to the mid-1980s, is rooted in the experiences of African women, but her theological insights are universal. While the demographic heart of world Christianity has shifted southward, much of Christian theology still centers on white, male, European (and American) expositors and experiences. Oduyoye has contributed to and helped lead a much-needed recentering and broadening of theological perspective—and given all of us the opportunity to see God's liberating work in the world through a glass slightly less darkly.

RESPONSE

Important for Democracy

Valerie Jennings  called Stacey Abrams' cover story "Unafraid to Hope" (Sept/Oct 2020) a "very important article for democracy." Ann Kirkland agreed: "Voter registration should be a foregone conclusion if you were born in the U.S." Jeff Maher added, "I am proud of being an Australian, [where] voting is considered an obligation and fines apply for [not] doing your best to do so." In "A Brief Sigh of Relief" (Sept/Oct), Sandy Ovalle called out racist underpinnings of U.S. immigration laws. Topher Mehlhoff  disagreed: "It's the other way around. Racist laws lead to racist narratives to support those laws." Jesus Francisco Javier Partida  noted that "the history of humanity on this planet is a history of human migration. Policies designed to keep people from crossing arbitrary lines are a fool's errand." And Jerry Hill  agreed with David P. Gushee's Sept/Oct article "Born in Heresy": "Bad theology and doctrine seems to always lead to abusing others, condemning others, and, yes, enslaving others."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"PARTICIPATORY
HOPE IS THE
ONLY KIND
THAT WORKS
NOW. I WANT
CLEATS,
NOT RUBY
SLIPPERS."

Barbara Brown Taylor
Author, teacher, and Episcopal priest

CONTRIBUTING



Tomás Insua

While he's always considered himself a "socially active" Catholic, Tomás Insua says it wasn't until he surveyed the aftermath of the deadly 2013 Super Typhoon Haiyan that he "began to develop a visceral sense of the connection between climate change and my Catholic values." Now a climate activist and executive director of the Global Catholic Climate Movement, Insua says because of the ecumenical efforts around the globe (p. 15) "we have good hope for 2021—and the years ahead."



Oluwatomisin Oredein

"I do not apologize for my voice in the field of Christian theology," says Oluwatomisin Oredein, whose study of Mercy Amba Oduyoye's work (p. 22) freed her to do theology from an American African perspective. Assistant professor and director of the Black Church Studies program at Brite Divinity School, Oredein says she would tell her younger self: "People of African descent are the strongest peoples in the world! Resisting evil is not only your custom, but also your strength."

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2.3
million

Number of people incarcerated in the United States

555,000

Number of people locked up in the U.S. who have not been convicted of a crime

5x

Rate of COVID-19 infection among incarcerated people compared to the national rate, through June 6, 2020

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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1

MOBILIZING HOPE

BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

SILVER LININGS

In Paul's letter to the church at Rome, he writes, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). This passage can easily be misconstrued to mean that adversity and hardship are ordained by God. A more faithful interpretation is that God can generate good out of even terrible circumstances. In light of this eternal truth, throughout this troubling year I have found hope and resilience by discovering silver linings in the midst of uncertainty and anguish.

One of the most important blessings has been extra, uninterrupted time with my family. A frenetic travel schedule in the spring came to a screeching halt in March, and I haven't been on a plane since. My daily two-hour commute to my kids' school and to work also vanished. I have tried to pour much of this precious gift into my family, particularly as my

**"WEARING A MASK
HAS BECOME A
SIMPLE, POWERFUL
WAY TO EXPRESS
THE GOLDEN RULE."**

“MY APPRECIATION OF NATURE HAS DEEPENED AMID THE PANDEMIC.”

two young sons adjusted to the new COVID reality, including virtual classes that tested all our sanity. Our family spent the early months of the pandemic playing many games together and watching every Marvel movie made and our favorite kid-appropriate sports movies, from *Remember the Titans* to *Miracle* to 42.

My appreciation of nature also has deepened amid the pandemic. We filled our weekends with family hikes as we discovered new trails across the Washington, D.C. region. The beauty and majesty of nature take on a whole new meaning when you are holed up at home for so long.

The pandemic also forced me to lean more on

God and cultivate a more disciplined prayer life. This was crucial to overcome many moments when I felt powerless in the face of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism. I developed a fuller appreciation of the Golden Rule in seeing how wearing a mask became a simple but powerful way to love and protect our neighbors as well as ourselves.

This year revealed so much about the brokenness and inequity within our economy and body politic. We shouldn't try to return to an old normal but instead must reimagine and work to build a radically more just new, even abnormal, reality. This is true not just for our politics and economy but also for our personal, family, and community life.

These silver linings are not meant to discount the immense suffering and hardship recent events have inflicted. The Israelites didn't know how long it would take to enter the Promised Land as they spent 40 years wandering in the desert. Likewise, we don't know how long it will take to conquer COVID-19 and live into a new normal. But what we do know and can take solace in is Emmanuel, God with us. The journey of wandering in the wilderness and exile amid this pandemic can help us mature in our faith walk, learning to lean more on God even as we lean further into our love for one another and deepen our commitment to build a radically more just nation and world. And that is a silver lining worth fighting for together. ✨



Adam Russell Taylor is president-elect of Sojourners.



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New Book by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson Calls Us to a Life of Spiritual Pilgrimage

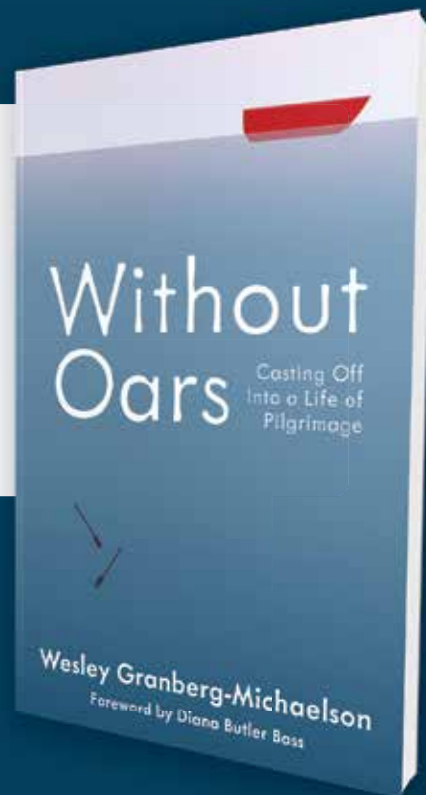
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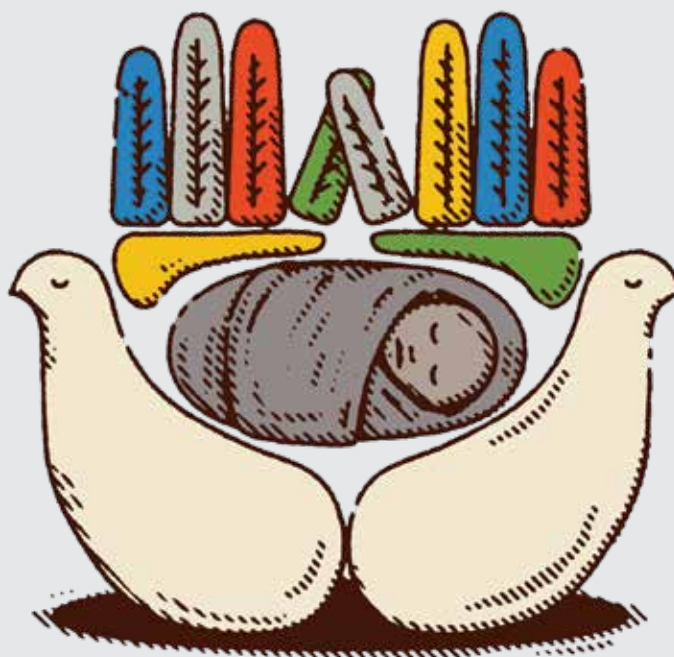
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IN LABOR AND IN REST

What will it take for Christ to be born in us
when we have sighs too deep for words?



2

When I was in labor with my third child, my older sister was bewildered by my pain. As I walked the hall of our two-story row house in southwest Philadelphia, seeking moments of comfort between birth pool and bed, couch and floor, she said to me, “But, you’ve already done this before. Why is it so hard?”

“I haven’t birthed *this* baby!” I cried out to her. Then I settled into a deep silence, preparing myself for the next wave, the next earth-shaking moan.

Our souls are crying out this Advent of 2020. We want to call this season the coldest, these times the most hostile, this ache unbearable.

And it is true. We are saturated with the names of the dead, no longer shocked by callous leaders or the collective amnesia that refuses responsibility for ongoing systems of oppression.

Though history and our theology will remind us that empires fall, that pandemics cease, that justice will prevail, such awareness doesn’t diminish the pain of raw grief, this

collective lament. We haven't celebrated Christmas this year; how can we even begin?

I do not know how hope still shivers through my bones. I do not know how to unclench rage-tight teeth. I do not know how to look at this war-soaked, warming planet and believe that the Author of Peace is weeping and raging with us and making straight these deeply crooked and corrupt paths.

Yet, the life within awakens my imperative to push, to breathe, to embrace hope as an active verb. For Christ to be born in us, this year, this day, this moment, requires that we be active, engaged, and moving beyond what we believe we are able to do. Shifting and moaning with sighs too deep for words.

I had not really thought of the sacramental nature of this season until I read "The Sacrament of Christmas," by Howard Thurman, in *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*. Each stanza begins with the phrase "I make."

*I make an act of faith toward all [hu]mankind,
Where doubts would linger and suspicions brood.*

*I make an act of joy toward all sad hearts,
Where laughter pales and tears abound. ...*

*I make an act of love toward friend and foe,
Where trust is weak and hate burns bright.*

*I make a deed to God of all my days—
And look out on life with quiet eyes.*

It is tempting to make a saint out of anyone who survives the horrors of U.S. apartheid with soul intact, with grace pouring from mouth and heart like shimmering halos. Born in 1899, Howard Thurman bore witness to the lynching era and emerged a prophetic thought leader whose teaching served as midwife to the civil rights movement.

Every time I gave birth, I thought of the women who had come before me. Some die in the process, others bear lifelong injury, and others make it.

I carried them all with me in my body, just as I carry everyone who did not survive this year or the years before. We who survive deep pain don't need to be anyone's hero, but we can give someone courage, in that moment, to take another breath.

Already the hounds of consumerism are nipping at our heels. How will we answer when asked how we plan to celebrate Christmas this year? With an unusually empty December calendar, stripped of pageantry, concerts, parades, or even retreats, we could learn to be makers with the One who is asking again, this year, this moment, to be born in us today. ❖

Josina Guess is a regular contributor and managing editor for *The Bitter Southerner*. She lives in Comer, Ga.

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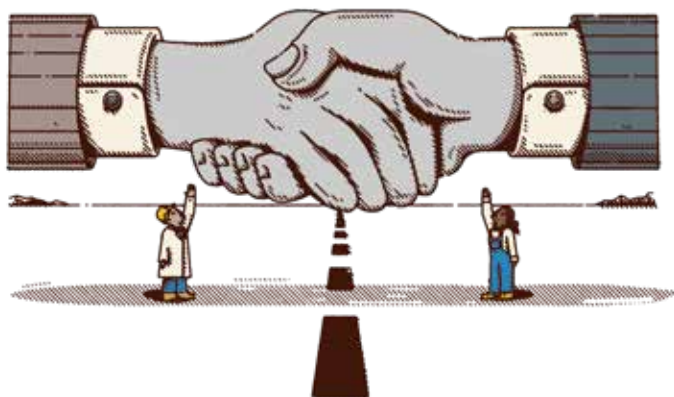
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COMMENTARY

BY CHLOE NOËL



CAN WE BUILD A JUST TRADE SYSTEM?

Focus on people, not corporations.

In 1994, Congress passed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), establishing a template for free trade deals that was neither free nor fair. While North American trade tripled and corporations profited under NAFTA, the costs were borne by manufacturing workers across the U.S. and Mexico, smallholder corn farmers, and our environmental commonwealth. These trade consequences contributed to migration to the U.S.

The dirty secret about free trade agreements is that much of the content has little to do with trade. They serve to maximize corporate profits by pressuring countries to weaken or jettison domestic laws that serve the common good—such as public health, financial, and environmental regulations—to make room for policies that serve corporate interests and economic superpowers. Corporations and other nations can sue for perceived “unfair treatment,” which often costs taxpayers millions or billions of dollars and results in a regulatory chilling effect. With hundreds of U.S. government-approved industry trade advisers at the negotiating table—and few civil society representatives—is this any surprise?

Companies claim they need these “benefits” to secure their investments. But experience with NAFTA and subsequent free trade deals demonstrates that without specific consideration of vulnerable people and the planet, free trade policies are a hinderance, not a help, to just and sustainable development where it is needed most—including the U.S.

President Trump’s “America First” trade policies and corporate tax cuts have broken international relationships and incentivized moving hundreds of thousands of U.S. jobs overseas. Nationalism that pits nations and workers against each other obfuscates the fact that people and God’s creation everywhere are harmed by corporate-rigged economic policies.

Trade deals have always had bipartisan supporters and detractors

in Washington. Neither party has done much to dramatically shift away from the NAFTA model.

Scripture invites all people to have a place at God’s table. For Christians, this means creating a people- and Earth-centered economy—an “economy of inclusion,” as Pope Francis calls it. COVID-19 has created a health, hunger, and economic crisis exacerbated by trade policies that limit access to food, medicines, and jobs. How can U.S. trade policy be developed in a way that is righteous and just?

First, kick corporate interests out of policymaking and restore sovereign governments’ right to legislate for the common good. People, not corporations, should have the majority of seats at the negotiating table. Trade policies should be developed with public transparency and participation; the 2017 transparency policy adopted by the European Union is one model.

Second, strengthen local and regional economies, including supporting worker-owned co-ops and “buy local” incentives—such as the Depression-era “Buy American” law—to create more resilient and stable supply chains, communities, and planet.

Third, align trade policies with the Paris climate agreement—not with fossil fuel industry goals.

Fourth, ensure that trade agreements include the suite of international agreements related to the environment, labor protections, transparency, and human rights, with strong oversight and consequences for noncompliance. These policies should be a prerequisite for trade deals. Rather than fight regulations, investors can reduce risk by complying with them.

Lastly, secure rights for people and rules for business. The United Nations is negotiating a binding treaty and justice system on “transnational corporations and other business enterprises with respect to human rights” to hold corporations accountable for environmental and human rights violations. Once completed, countries should adopt it and incorporate it into trade agreements.

It is time to turn over the tables of corporate-dominated trade policy. Regardless of who serves in the White House and Congress, we have an opportunity to rethink trade so that it really works for people and tackles the climate crisis. ✦

Chloe Noël is the Faith-Economy-Ecology program coordinator at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

T

THE GLOBAL CHURCH RACES TO CARBON ZERO

The climate crisis is a moral crisis. What else should we call the willful choice to inflict hunger, disease, and suffering on those in the poorest circumstances?

At the same time, the climate crisis is an opportunity to allow God's healing grace to enter our lives. As with every great failure of our collective conscience, the way forward begins with each of us standing up in faith and love to right the wrongs of the past. Around the world, faith communities are doing just that. As national governments fail to show the decisive and visionary leadership we need, faith communities are taking up the mantle of justice. Under the banner of the U.N.'s "race to zero" initiative, many faith communities are committing to meaningful changes in the way they operate to build a healthy, safe world that protects everyone.

It's hard work, but it is the way of the future. In 50 years, the Earth's fossil fuels will be depleted, and the world will no longer run on oil and gas. The only questions are how quickly we can make this change and whether we can make it well. Many faith institutions have chosen to put their pocketbooks to greater service by divesting from fossil fuel companies and reinvesting in clean renewable energy. To date, nearly 400 faith-based institutions have divested, constituting the single largest source of commitments in the global divestment movement. Committed institutions range from huge international networks to small communities of women religious around the globe. It's a big movement that is successfully pressuring oil companies to think beyond the status quo.

Prophetic pressure is sorely needed. As just one example of the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure—an expansion that many oil companies desperately try to greenwash—the French oil giant Total is now working with Standard Bank to build



an oil pipeline in East Africa. If successful, this would be the world's longest heated crude-oil pipeline, causing large-scale displacement of communities and putting tens of thousands of jobs at risk.

Much of the pipeline would pass through Uganda, a dictatorship. Who will benefit from it? You can bet it won't be the majority of the people who would live under its shadow. This is one reason why Catholics in East Africa and beyond mounted a petition against the pipeline. Thousands of signatures were delivered to Standard Bank, in an incredibly courageous action of confronting a dictatorship that does not brook dissent.

Catholics don't stand alone in the movement to hasten the arrival of a clean and just future. Christians from across the U.S. ecumenical family have taken strong action. In just the past few months, the Evangelical Environmental Network has published a letter encouraging Pennsylvania to commit to progress on climate, Lutherans have created an online climate-focused worship service, and Interfaith Power and Light has launched an initiative to rally commitments for people of faith to consider climate justice when they vote.

Next year the Vatican will offer a transformative new program, the *Laudato Si'* Action Platform, to help communities implement Pope Francis' visionary *Laudato Si'* encyclical. This is a huge effort that will even more strongly cement care for our common home as a priority for the Catholic Church.

Unity in faith makes actions like these possible. Yes, the challenges are enormous. But with a Spirit who unites us and a God who offers us new life, we can band together to make sure the future is safer and more just than the past. We are truly in a race against the worst of the climate crisis. We will overcome by grounding ourselves in the faith and hope we share. ✕

**"FIFTY YEARS FROM
 NOW, THE WORLD
 WILL NOT RUN ON
 OIL AND GAS."**

Tomás Insua is executive director of the Global Catholic Climate Movement.

‘WE CAN ONLY BE SAVED TOGETHER’

3



Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis’ encyclical on “social friendship” released in October, sounds like a new gelato flavor—something between *fior di latte* and *tutti frutti*. Like the Italian frozen dessert, Francis’ pastoral sections melt in your mouth—but a nutty, bitter crunch hides in every bite.

Encyclical letters are used by popes to address important issues. Recently, these letters have been addressed not only to Catholics, but to “all people of good will.”

Where *Laudato Si’*, released five years ago, developed new doctrine and broke ground in Catholic social teaching to address the fierce urgency of climate collapse, “On Universal Fraternity and Social Friendship” (as it’s called in English) counsels us not to backslide as a human family. Cardinal Michael Czerny said, “If *Laudato Si’* taught us that *everything* is connected, then *Fratelli Tutti* teaches us that *everyone* is connected.”

Steeped in the tradition of Catholic social thought, Francis applies social ethics to the human conflicts we face right now—migration, racism, neoliberal economic policies, nationalist demagogues and exclusionary populist movements, war, terrorism, and capital punishment. All these trends, writes Francis, deny Jesus’ call for a common affection for all peoples rooted in their human dignity. In other words, Francis offers a clear and comprehensive remix of his greatest hits.

Francis uses the parable of the Good Samaritan as the encyclical’s biblical backbone—a rich and generous reading that even explores the dependency of the Samaritan on a local business (the inn) to achieve a social good. Social friendship allows the Samaritan “to interrupt his journey, change his plans, and unexpectedly come to the aid of an injured person who needed his help.” The parable’s lens allows Francis to assail an ideal in which too many of us have put our faith: that we are “self-

“POPE FRANCIS OFFERS A CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE REMIX OF HIS GREATEST HITS.”

made, prosperous orphans,” as Czerny put it. We don’t recognize that God created us. We think we deserve everything we have and consume. We think we are autonomous and alone, with no familial duties or love. An empty lie like this allows us to readily sacrifice some of the human family for the sake of others “considered worthy of a carefree existence.” The medicine for this kind of sickness, Francis advises, is to remember that “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together.”

Francis’ blunt application of Catholic social teaching on economic life continues to rattle free market capitalists in the U.S. (with its radical-sounding notion that economies exist to serve people, not the other way around). But Americans might also learn from Francis’ analysis of how bullies operate. “Destroying self-esteem is an easy way to dominate others. Behind these trends that tend to level our world, there flourish powerful interests that take advantage of such low self-esteem, while attempting, through the media and networks, to create a new culture in the service of the elite. This plays into the opportunism of financial speculators and raiders, and the poor always end up the losers,” writes Francis.

On war, the pope reiterates that Jesus openly condemned the use of force to gain power over others and that “just war” is a concept we no “longer uphold in our day,” demonstrating a “steady tightening down of expectations for the usefulness of just war theory,” according to theologian Gerald Schlabach. As “just war” moves away from the heart of Catholic doctrine, we will see a robust ethic of Catholic nonviolence begin to flourish.

Advent is a season for deep murmurings in the heart, where we ponder the mystical affections between an animating Spirit of Life and our own earthy flesh and bone. The ligament that binds Spirit to bone has an ancient name. It’s called love.

In a time when so many bear so much out of sight of neighbors or family, Francis reminds us: “No single act of love for God will be lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted. All of these encircle our world like a vital force.” ❖

Rose Marie Berger, author of *Bending the Arch*, is senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.



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MOVING MOUNTAINS BY LISA SHARON HARPER

FIVE LESSONS FROM 2020



1.

1. Character matters

In 2016, we heard the recording of Donald Trump bragging that he could grab women by the genitalia and kiss them without consent. This reveal of sexual abuse was a blinking red warning sign: “No character!” But most white American Christians voted for him anyway.

Now hundreds of thousands of Americans are no longer with us. Children are dead, separated from their parents, neglected and abused in our detention centers. Police continue to kill unarmed Black people with impunity. Evidence shows that wherever there is violence against women, there will also be violence against ethnic minorities and the land. Character matters.

2. Our votes matter

If you ever doubt that, remember 2020: body bags, 175 cities on fire, food lines, closed businesses, fears for the future, the president having tear gas shot into a crowd so he could walk across the street and hold a Bible in front of a church he doesn’t attend. Let us learn that a non-vote is a vote for the winner. In a democracy, votes have the power to bless or curse millions. It is our civic duty to approach elections as informed citizens. It is our Christian duty to leverage elections to protect the least of these.

3. Our families matter

On Feb. 14, my mother was rushed to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with a “viral syndrome.” Before COVID-19, we might go a week

“WHAT BROUGHT US TO THIS BRINK?”

or two without talking. Now, I check in every day. All this time on the phone has led to stories, laughter over things in the news, and shared tears over revelations about our family, our relationship, and our future. My family has come together like it never has before. We even started a text thread to keep tabs on each other and share news to make sure everyone is informed.

4. Black life doesn’t matter here

One of the most telling moments of this year was in early April when it was reported that a disproportionate number of people filling hospitals and morgues across the U.S. were Black, Latino, and Native American. Soon, the president changed his approach: Rather than continue a lockdown, he encouraged everyone to come out and utilize businesses. At the same time, he pressured Black and brown meatpackers to return to work without adequate protections from the virus. Scores have since died. If you ever hear someone chant “All Lives Matter,” simply say, “COVID.”

5. People who identify as white must repent

The United States is in the shadow of the most contentious election season in its modern history. What brought us to this brink? Some may say it was the fight over *Roe v. Wade*. Others may say racism against people of color. Both have merit, but it runs deeper. What brought us to the brink of losing democracy? White men’s need to control and define the world, and white women’s complicity. It is not about hatred. It is about narcissism. It is not about Democrats or Republicans. It is about white men’s war against God for supremacy. White men and the women who prop them up: Both must find their way to their knees. They must confess. They must repent. They must repair what they have broken in the world. ✕

Lisa Sharon Harper is president of *FreedomRoad.us* and the author of several books, including the forthcoming *Fortune*, the story of her family and a call for reparations.

EYEWITNESS

4

“EVIL IS
PREDICTABLE,
BUT LOVE IS
ALWAYS
INNOVATIVE.”



BELONGING ACROSS BORDERS

“Las Posadas is a Catholic tradition in which community members set up a pilgrimage. People go door to door singing songs, wanting to be let in. And at every door, the innkeeper does not let them in. At the last home, the people *do* get let in, and there’s a party with tamales and candy. Posada Sin Fronteras [The Inn Without Borders] takes place at the San Diego-Tijuana border. We treat San Diego as the innkeeper and Tijuana as the one who is asking to be let in.

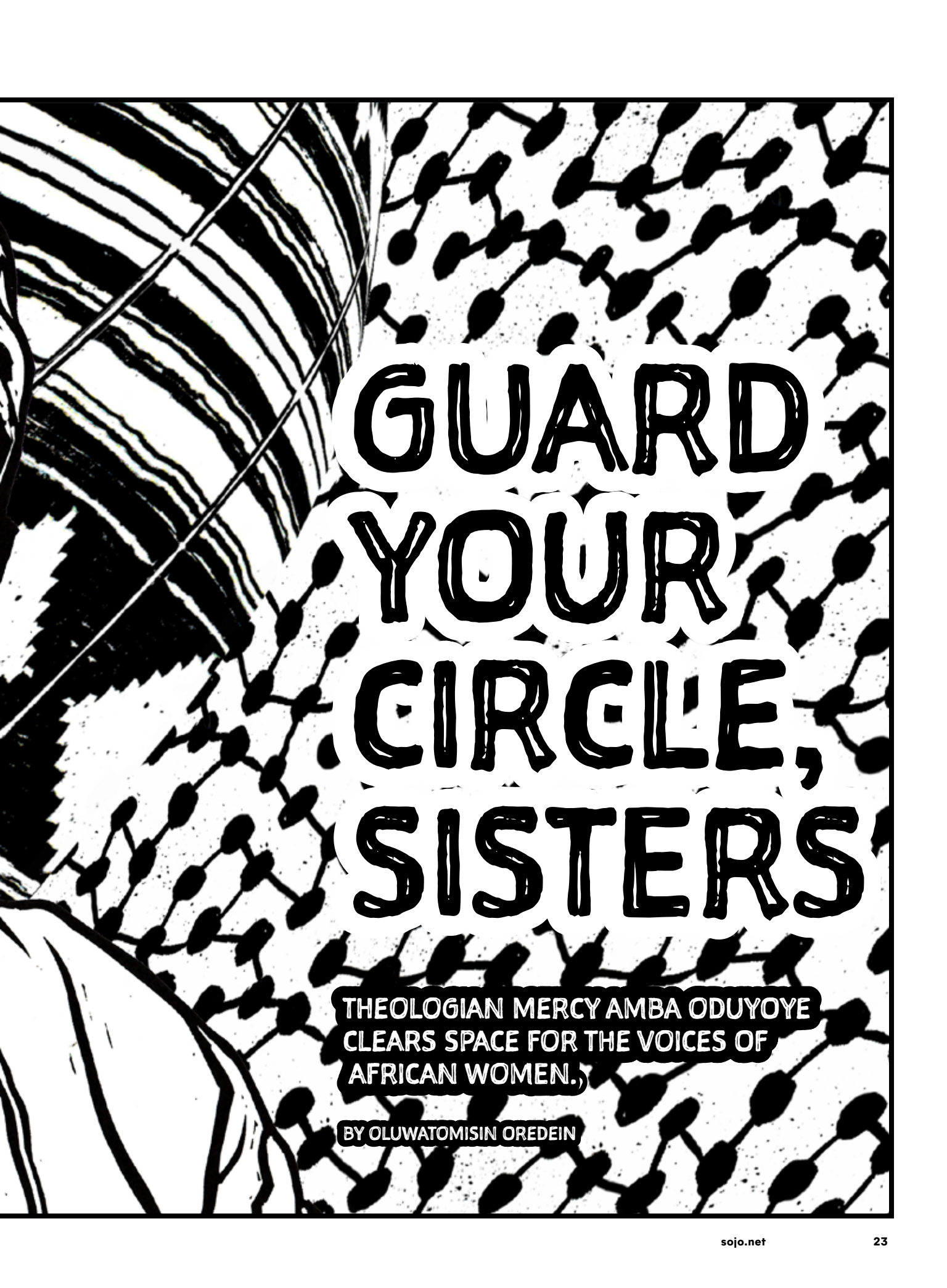
It begins with a mile walk along the beach, [where] you begin to embody what it’s like to walk those lands as someone who is not from there and yet feels a belonging there. You can see the two border walls. On the U.S. side is a tower that has a camera on it, and if you look to your right, you will see a lighthouse on the Tijuana side. All of this happens at the shores of the ocean, whose waves have no limits to their crossing. Birds fly over and above. Aquatic animals move back and forth. And if you look really close to the border wall, you can see how the moisture of the waves and the graininess of the sand slowly but surely erode the steel structure that is trying to divide creation.

It’s hard to see to the other side of the wall. Once, I locked eyes with another woman who looked about my age and height. Fragments of our fingers met while we sang “Silent Night”—me in English and her in Spanish. But in the past five years, it’s gotten more difficult to gather. Last year we weren’t allowed to actually come to the wall. So, I am unsure what this year will look like. What I know is that evil is predictable, but love is always innovative.” ❖

Jennifer Guerra Aldana helps organize the annual Posada Sin Fronteras in San Diego/Tijuana. She spoke with Sojourners’ Jenna Barnett about the tradition, which reenacts Mary and Joseph’s travels as described in Luke’s gospel.







GUARD YOUR CIRCLE, SISTERS

**THEOLOGIAN MERCY AMBA ODUYOYE
CLEARS SPACE FOR THE VOICES OF
AFRICAN WOMEN.**

BY OLUWATOMISIN OREDEIN

Two things are true about Mercy Amba Oduyoye: She is one of Africa's premier Christian theologians, and she is one of Africa's most underrated Christian theologians. Both truths hang together.

Oduyoye is underrecognized in the world of religious studies, especially Christian theology, because of the focus of her work: African women. For more than 60 years, through her theological and advocacy work and her ecumenical involvement, Oduyoye has centered the experiences of these women, cementing their voices within the canon of Christian theology and ethics.

"Christianity as manifested in the Western churches in Africa does little to challenge sexism, whether in church or society," Oduyoye writes in *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. "I believe that the experience of women in the church in Africa contradicts the Christian claim to promote the worth (equal value) of every person. Rather, it shows how Christianity reinforces the cultural conditioning of compliance and submission and leads to the depersonalization of women."

African women, much like their African American womanist counterparts, have resisted narratives of women's experience put forth by white Western women or African men. White women, they explain, cannot speak for African women. And African men cannot speak for African women.

Oduyoye recognized early in her career that African women must carve out space to narrate their own lives and theological ideas. African women "take a critical distance" from "European and American theologies of various types, including missionary and feminist/womanist theologies," Oduyoye explains in her 2001 book *Introducing African Women's Theology*, "as their priority is to communicate African women's own understanding." African women can speak for themselves; Oduyoye gained this wisdom and courage from her upbringing.

'THE ADVANTAGES OF KEEPING WOMEN INVISIBLE'

Mercy Amba Oduyoye is the eldest of nine children of Charles Kwaw Yamoah and Mercy Yaa Dakwaa Yamoah. Oduyoye was born in October 1933 on their family's cocoa farm in southeast Ghana; Oduyoye's love of chocolate today seems a fitting tribute to her birth.

Her parents were members of the Akan ethnic group; Oduyoye's Akan name, Ewudziwa, is a tribute to her maternal grandfather. The Akan are a major people

group; in the early 17th century, there were 33 independent Akan states, located mainly in what is now Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Akan culture is heavily infused with the belief that spiritual beings are present in every facet of life; one does not act in the world alone, but other actors, material beings and otherwise, influence outcomes in the physical world. With this openness to religion, even from other cultures, the Akan were not resistant to colonial missionaries. Many Akan people, including members of Oduyoye's family, accepted Christianity.

Oduyoye descended from Presbyterian maternal grandparents and a paternal family with Methodist roots and was raised in a household where Christianity was taken seriously—but also subject to Western and Akan cultural shortcomings. Patriarchy was an undeniable force present within both. Both Akan culture and Western Christianity discriminated against Akan women. Though matrilineal in their kinship and familial structures, the Akan people are not matriarchal. Thus, Oduyoye grew up in a culture that emphasized the importance of women yet failed to grant women the opportunity to be leaders within their local community and Christian church.

She saw how her father ministered and received affirmation from white Westerners that her mother and other women were denied. "Mama carried more responsibility in the church without getting any more authority than Nana [her maternal grandmother] had and maybe even less," Oduyoye writes in an essay in *Inheriting our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*, "because Westernization was teaching Africa the advantages of keeping women invisible."

This patriarchal stance affected generations of African women. It became clear to Oduyoye that African women and the church did not seem to mix—or rather, that African women only fit into the church in the ways white Western and African men deemed fit.

Oduyoye decided to study theology to uncover what African women sounded like within it. Noel Q. King, a church history professor at the University of Ghana, and Oduyoye's mentor E. Bolaji Idowu encouraged her to pursue further study in Christian theology. Idowu, Oduyoye wrote in a 1995 journal article, "saw the need for the participation of women in the theological enterprise and in the ministry of the church, and took steps towards its realization." Oduyoye's studies took her to the University of Ghana, the University of London, and Cambridge University, where she graduated with a master's in theology in 1969.

GO FETCH THE TEA!

After a period teaching at Wesley Girls' High School in Cape Coast, Ghana, Oduyoye dove into ecumenical work. The force of her voice got her many invitations into ecumenical organizations; she served on the World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) is an organization determined to see "the situation in which Christians struggle to live as the body of Christ and to present the gospel," as Oduyoye puts it. But even with this focus, EATWOT often overlooked its women participants. Oduyoye and other women sought

...
**FOR MORE
THAN 60
YEARS,
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OF AFRICAN
WOMEN.**



to address this by creating the Commission on Theology from Third World Women's Perspective. This commission served its purpose, allowing women to name and actively address the plight of women in developing nations.

In 1989, Oduyoye founded the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an organization that seeks to create space for African women's theological contributions and experiences to be heard, developed, and shared globally. The circle, which took almost 20 years to come to fruition, is the initiative most closely associated with Oduyoye's name, along with her creation of the movement of "African women's theology." The group emphasizes, according to Oduyoye, that "African communities are multifaceted, that religion and culture had much that was misogynistic, and that issues of justice for women had to be raised." It is the space in which Oduyoye would begin developing her own theological language.

Oduyoye's work in EATWOT and the circle had significant impact, but her work in the academy helped her to see most clearly the need for doing Christian theology that centers African women's experience. In a 2001 article for *The Ecumenical Review*, Oduyoye recalled an incident while teaching at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. "I found myself sitting at a table with 10 male colleagues at a departmental meeting and was asked to go and bring tea for all." She didn't fetch the tea. Later, she says, "I went home and mulled over this experience, asking myself how many African women were in this predicament of being the sole woman among men theologians." Through that sexist moment Oduyoye recognized the dire need for African women's representation within the Christian theological sphere. Not long after, African women's theology was born.

HOW IT FEELS TO BE ON THE FRINGE

African women's theology acknowledges African culture to be the backbone of African identity but does "not accept," as Oduyoye puts it, "that African men's theology should suffice for the entire faith community." The crux of African women's theology is advocacy: African women have not been fully cared for or heard. In response, African women constructed their own theology, Oduyoye says, "at their own pace, from their own place" while portraying "their priorities and perspectives." One means of doing so has been through publication.

Over the course of her life, Oduyoye has

... WHITE WOMEN CANNOT SPEAK FOR AFRICAN WOMEN. AND AFRICAN MEN CANNOT SPEAK FOR AFRICAN WOMEN.

written, co-authored, and co-edited numerous articles and books in the field of African women's theology. When she recognized that there were no texts covering church history written by African women, Oduyoye created the first: *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, published in 1986. In the book, she interrogates church history and colonial history from an African women's theological perspective. Aware of her contextual position in writing this book, Oduyoye admits that it may be considered "unsystematic" by traditional gatekeepers but insists that it "gives some idea of the theological issues we in Africa face and some impetus toward further articulation of the faith."

Oduyoye's work challenges the Eurocentric nature of much of Christian theology. "There was a time when the only acceptable adjective to append to the word theology (apart from confessional words like Lutheran or Anglican) was the word *German*," she writes in the introduction to *Hearing and Knowing*. Her theological work makes clear that "Third World theology" must be granted a hearing in a world that places certain voices, namely European ones, on a pedestal.

Less than 10 years later, Oduyoye wrote *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (1995), an in-depth look at how African culture and Christianity both profess a patriarchal understanding of communal life—and how African women constantly resist that understanding. African women interrogate religion and culture from a complex position. "Like African men," she writes, "African women are well aware of the impact of colonization and the attempted Christianization of Africa. African women are aware of bearing more than half of the life-support burden of Africa, and Christian women feel more than anyone else the church's capitulation to Western norms, which it then propagates as Christian norms."

In 2001, she published *Introducing African Women's Theology*, one of her most popular works. It reframes traditional doctrinal positions—a doctrine of God, Christology, theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology—and introduces unconventional ones, such as hospitality and spirituality, from an African feminist perspective. In this work, Oduyoye unapologetically does theology for African women.

African women understand how it feels to be on the fringe. Thus, for them, theology is framed as a communal process. "In doing theology women adopt a perspectival approach rather than analysis and critique of existing works," Oduyoye writes. It is not an armchair exercise but a practical, communal event. Women, Oduyoye asserts, "grant that there are unique insights that come from individuals from contexts other than one's own and that there is something to be appreciated from that which is different."

In situating African women in the conversation of Christian theology, Oduyoye's approach is subversive: Her doctrine of God incorporates colonial history, arguing that "African women discover ... the Triune God as liberator of the oppressed, the rescuer of the marginalized and all who live daily in the throes of pain, uncertainty, and deprivation." She reimagines Jesus as in solidarity with African women. These women relate closely to him and "testify to what Jesus has done for them."

Oduyoye relocates male and female gender disparity



into the conversation of being human. She understands that “we, women and men, are human together.” Her study of the church holds to the truth of a *whole* church—globally, theologically, and across genders—and advocates for holistic community. The “true image of the church of Christ” requires the “partnership of women and men.” Oduyoye even boldly includes the African principle of hospitality as a core doctrine, writing that “Offering and receiving hospitality is a key indication of the African emphasis on sustaining our life-force at all costs.”

Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, a Kenyan human rights activist and close friend of Oduyoye, recalls Oduyoye’s drive to create opportunities for African women where there once were none. Instead of “lamenting the dearth of writings from African women,” Kanyoro writes, Oduyoye “was motivated to change the situation.” Without Oduyoye’s persistence, African women in theology would not have the platforms they have now. Oduyoye was “one of the first African women theologians,” according to scholars Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, “to write and publish theological reflections of any significance, particularly with respect to African women.” Oduyoye has opened the door for countless women after her.

WRITE YOUR OWN STORY

When I was a first-year doctoral student, I asked my professor whose work I—an African woman raised in the U.S.—should read to see myself.

I needed more than what Augustine and Barth could offer. Reading someone else would help make sense of my childhood experiences at a racist Southern Baptist

school. It would help me understand, I thought, what it was about African descent that so many white people found incomprehensibly fearful—and what it was that so many African Americans in my life yearned to connect with through me, my mother’s accent, and my family’s migration story.

In seminary, my canon expanded to include James H. Cone, Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, Howard Thurman, Vincent Wimbush, Emilie Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, Kelly Brown Douglas, and others, but I still could not quite see or hear myself fully in their work. They honored the history and story of the African American community; I was American African.

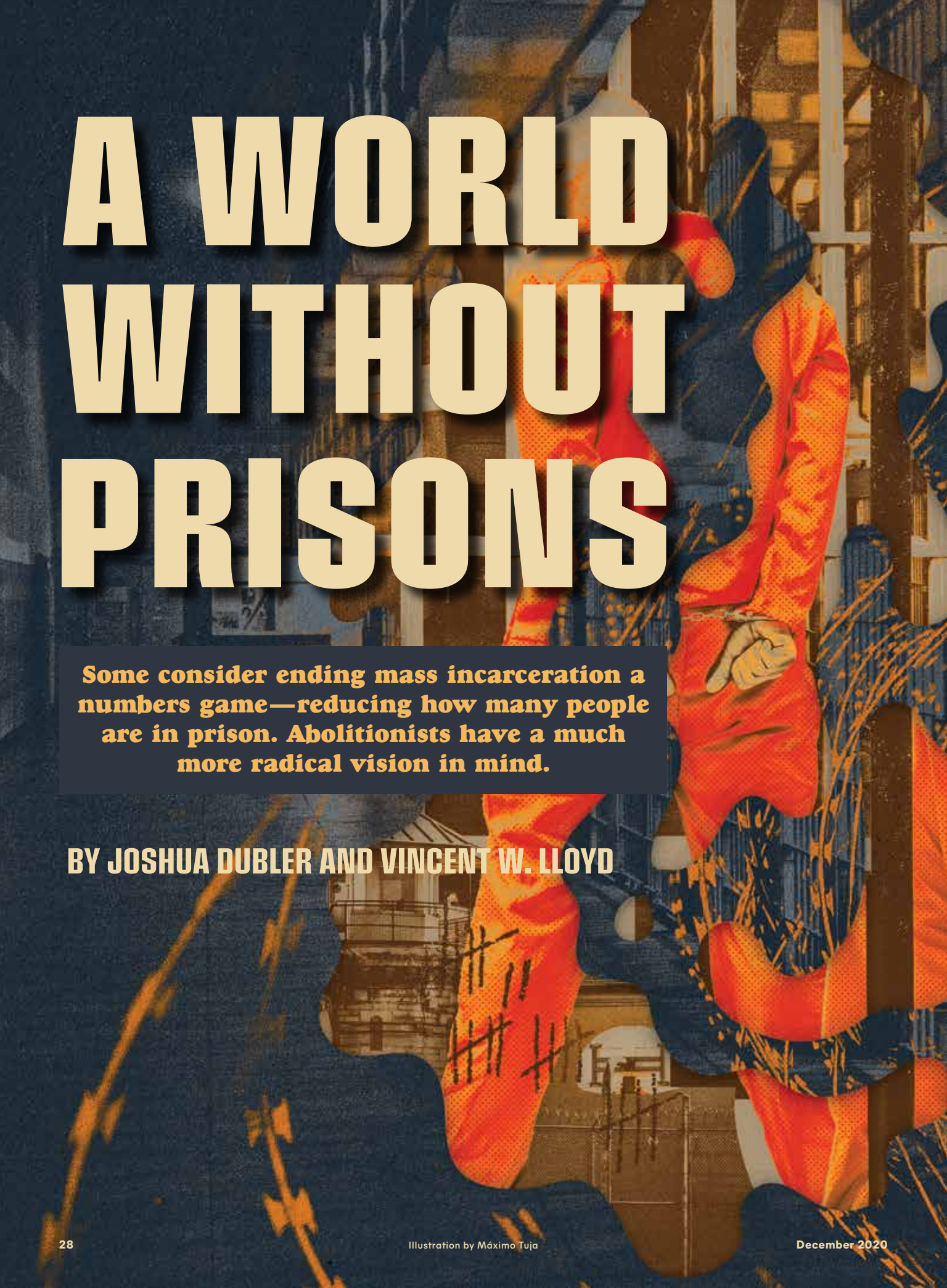
My professor—Dr. Esther Acolatse—gave me some advice: Start with Mercy Amba Oduyoye.

So, I read Oduyoye to hear from a voice who would tell me about myself. Except, she did not. Instead, Oduyoye told me about *herself* and the other continental African women with similar experiences of racism, patriarchy and sexism, classism and caste systems, health disparities, and political invisibility. She outlined the hardship of living at the intersection of African, woman, and Christian identities, and she told me about the religious-cultural imagination undergirding this adversity.

Oduyoye has dedicated her life to uplift women. She intentionally sought, found, and honed her voice for this purpose. African women’s theology, the fruit of her labor and persistence, has inspired me, too, to honor the truth of my existence. Carving space in the (theological) world for one’s self is Oduyoye’s greatest lesson. Write your own story—not the one others expect from you, not the one that steps one inch away from the fullness of your truth.

For me, this means proudly asserting an American African lens on how I do Christian theology. Like so many other African women, having the permission and the charge to do theology from the space of who I am is the eternal gift and legacy of Mercy Amba Oduyoye. ❖

Oluwatomisin Oredein is an assistant professor in Black religious traditions and constructive theology and ethics and the director of Black Church Studies at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. Her scholastic work engages creative articulations of African feminist, womanist, postcolonial, and Black theologies, with particular attention to women’s voices in the African diaspora.



A WORLD WITHOUT PRISONS

Some consider ending mass incarceration a numbers game—reducing how many people are in prison. Abolitionists have a much more radical vision in mind.

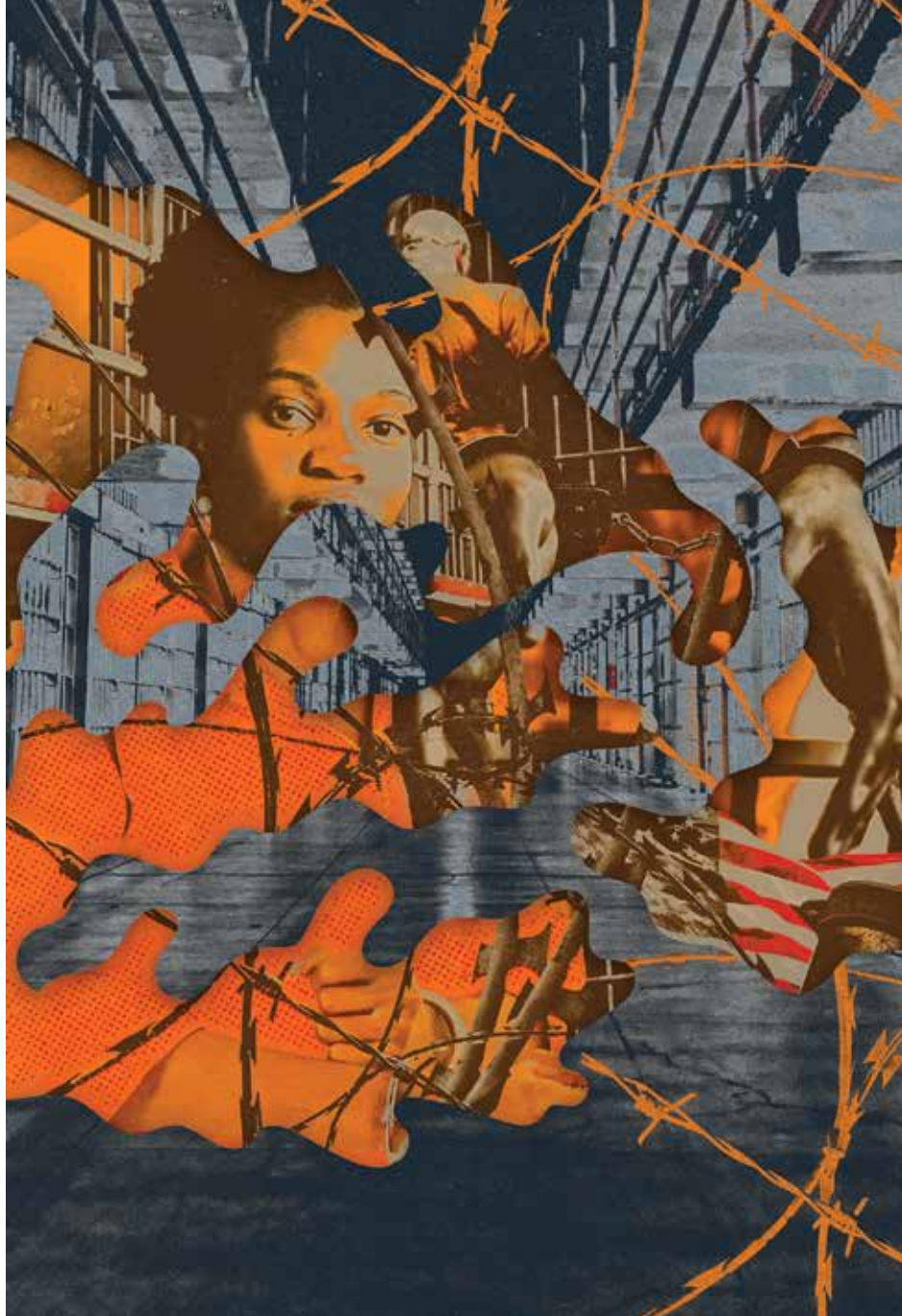
BY JOSHUA DUBLER AND VINCENT W. LLOYD



American hyperpolicing and mass incarceration are products of 50 years of cynical politics, vicious economics, and unconscionable racism—as the mass uprising in the wake of George Floyd’s killing has brought into ever clearer focus. Across the country, organizers on the ground are pushing to defund the police. Meanwhile, for people Left, Right, and center, “ending mass incarceration” has become a standard political talking point. But what precisely would “ending mass incarceration” entail?

Imagine that tomorrow we were to enact the most radical reforms to the prison system conceivable—reforms tailored to mass incarceration’s political, economic, and racial dimensions. First, to scale down the war on drugs, we could pardon every person in state and federal custody who is incarcerated solely on the basis of a nonviolent drug offense. Second, to stop caging people simply because they are poor, we could release every pretrial defendant who is sitting in jail solely because they are unable to make bail. Third, to end what’s been called the New Jim Crow, imagine if every Black state and federal prisoner—who constitute one-third of those in prison—were freed, regardless of whether they were guilty of a crime. By committing to these three measures (which, needless to say, aren’t being seriously considered in Washington or in any state capital), the U.S. would reduce its prison population by more than 50 percent, to a tick over 1 million people. In the COVID-era especially, when prisons and jails are incubators of the virus, many lives would be saved. Families would be reunited. Much suffering would be forestalled.

What such a robust menu of reforms would not meaningfully do, however, is end mass incarceration. Even at half its current size, the U.S. incarceration rate would remain three times that of France, four



times that of Germany, and similar degrees in excess of where it was for the first three-quarters of the 20th century. Given the massiveness of the American carceral edifice, we cannot reform our way out of mass incarceration. Nor does the reformist impulse address the crux of the problem.

The only way to end mass incarceration is with an abolitionist, not reformist, framework. Abolish prisons? But aren't prisons necessary for public safety and for effecting justice? So, as a society, we have been conditioned to believe. But real public safety would begin with changing the social order that engenders poverty, illness, and desperation, not with the people—disproportionately poor, young,

and Black or brown—whom this order criminalizes. As for justice, perhaps as a society we might collectively cultivate a vision where “justice” means something more robust and nourishing than merely putting the “bad people” in cages.

Does the public good require some small number of people to have their movements restricted for reasons of public well-being? For argument's sake, let us concede that it may. Even if so, is our prison system the proper means to go about that? As with the death penalty and whatever the next war happens to be, for ordinary American citizens in the age of mass incarceration, the best move available politically is to stand up—together—and to

categorically declare “no.”

Whether, like us, you regard locking a person in a cage as a moral abomination categorically, or whether you regard imprisonment as perhaps socially necessary but recognize the racism and classism that haunt our systems of imprisonment from top to bottom, by collectively assuming an abolitionist stance against human caging, we open up space for moral imagination and practical experimentation, and we gain leverage for securing marginal political victories.

THE POWER OF RELIGIOUS VISION

We write these words as scholars and practitioners of American religions who have worked with incarcerated people for more than two decades. As scholars, we have studied the power of the religious imagination to challenge the ways of the world, to loosen the hold of the purportedly immutable, and to motivate the pursuit of things deemed impossible. As religion practitioners and participants in social movements, we have experienced how religious tenets, practices, and narratives shape conceptions of justice and the people determined to effect that justice on the world. As friends of incarcerated people, we have seen how prisons are places where, in aggregate, people who have themselves experienced great harms are relegated for further suffering.

At the nexus of these subject positions, we would like to posit the following earnest provocation: Prison systems are a moral abomination and should be erased from the face of the earth. As a failed experiment and an engine of harm, the prison should be relegated to the scrapheap of bygone human endeavors. We can and must do better.

Easier said than done, of course. The network of institutions, supply chains, and social relations that abolitionists call “the prison industrial complex” is thoroughly embedded in our culture and is buttressed by a host of powerful material and political interests. If we are truly to end mass incarceration, these interests must be defeated. For this to happen, the social movement that began with the killing of Michael Brown and has intensified with the killing of George Floyd must continue to grow in size and power. As a mere conceptual matter, however, the principal obstacle for prison abolition rests on one thing and one thing only: its seeming impossibility.

This is one “triumph” of mass incarceration, which, even in its manifest failure at ensuring public safety or engendering accountability, has succeeded at making prison a putatively essential American institution.

But here the abolitionists of old have everything to teach us. Two hundred years ago, it was a fact of life that some people were owned by other people. On the strength of the greatest mass movement in American history, a radical principle was inscribed by men and women into the purported nature of things: Slavery is a moral abomination. Not merely chattel slavery as it then existed in the United States, but slavery as such. The domination inherent in one human owning another human is not under any condition to be tolerated. This simple and uncontested moral fact is a monumental historical achievement, and absent the courage and genius of generations of clear-seeing and brave people pulling together in the same direction, nature would to this day remain mute on the subject.

With the 2010 publication of Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, and intensified with the release of Ava DuVernay’s 2016 film *13th*, it has become a fugitive species of American common sense that slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration constitute a painfully unbroken chain. This powerful movement narrative ought not to be understood simply as genealogical, however. It must also be understood as analogical. Is locking a human being in a cage a moral abomination on a par with a human being owning another human being? That people are caged by the state rather than by individuals, and that they are caged—nominally—for things they have done should not distract from the basic proposition. Human ownership and human caging each merit abolition because the domination inherent in each represents a fundamental abnegation of human worth.

Do our words ring in your ear as being somewhat “preachy?” That isn’t by accident. Making the impossible possible calls for an exercise in radical imagination, and it is precisely in this respect that religious ardor, or something closely related to it, becomes an invaluable asset. Without religious dreams, we will not even be able to envision what a truer, more just justice will look like.

In the same way that America has a prison culture, America also has an abolition culture. Just as American prison culture is imbued with religion, Ameri-

Making the impossible possible calls for an exercise in radical imagination.

can abolition culture is also imbued with religion. Abolitionism’s revivalist spirit catalyzes social movements. It speaks the languages of divine coercion and absolute principle, and by doing so it challenges and reshapes the taken-for-granted ways of the world. It addresses concrete injustices, but its vision exceeds (and, when called for, even scorns) the pragmatic.

In the end, this revivalist spirit has the capacity to drive institutions for social democracy into existence. Today’s prison abolitionists are already moved by this spirit, but without getting religion—and igniting whole religious communities with abolitionist fire—prison abolitionism will never acquire its necessary force. Only a mass abolition-steeped fury will be able to tumble the walls down. Correlatively, we believe that only by embracing and avowing the abolition spirit will American religious communities live up to the moral demands of the present historical moment.

EXPERIMENTS IN THE “IMPOSSIBLE”

Across the country, in what abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba sometimes dubs “experiments,” community organizers are testing prototypes that could prefigure an abolitionist future. Under the rubric of decarceration, abolitionists push for legal and administrative reforms—“non-reformist reforms”—that shrink the footprint of the prison industrial complex. Under the banner of transformative justice, abolitionists work to remediate harms and engender accountability by nonviolent means. And in the form of mutual aid, abolitionists provide care and support, and bail people out of jail.

By talking to abolitionist organizers

around the country, we found that these abolitionist experiments often are colored by religious and spiritual convictions. At the intersection of prison abolition and Qur’anic principles of justice and charity, a coalition of Muslim organizers in Chicago in 2018 launched #believersbailout, a campaign that during the course of Ramadan raised more than \$100,000 that they used to bail people out of jail. The endgame is a world without prisons. “In the meantime,” as activist scholar Su’ad Abdul Khabeer put it, “like Abu Bakr freeing Bilal, like our enslaved African ancestors freeing each other, we’re going to free ourselves.”

At Chicago’s Second Unitarian Church, meanwhile, formerly incarcerated minister Jason Lydon decries in bold theological terms the evil of the prison industrial complex, blaming in part a “violent Calvinist theology” that pervades American common sense. Politicians and prison administrators frame prison as addressing violence, brutality, and abuse, but in Lydon’s view prisons merely reroute these pervasive American problems onto the bodies of specially designated victims (people living in poverty, Black people, and queer and trans people disproportionately): “We have public trials of individuals who have done something terrible, and these people take on the sins of all those who have inflicted harm. In watching these scapegoats be tried, convicted, incarcerated, and experience the many harms and violence of incarceration, survivors of violence are supposed to receive some kind of healing. This, we are told, is ‘justice.’”

But for Lydon, humans are sacred and human life is to be valued without exception. To give God and human beings what they are properly due means fighting to eradicate institutions that damage and

replacing them with practices that restore. Toward this end, Lydon founded Black and Pink, a group organizing with and on behalf of incarcerated LGBTQ and HIV+ prisoners.

Pastor Lynice Pinkard, who was ordained in the United Church of Christ, describes how under capitalism and Constantinian Christianity we came to mistakenly believe that the liberation of our own subgroup depends on the domination of others. For Pinkard, there is no sacrificing the “wicked” in service of the righteous. For any of us to be saved, all of us must be saved together. In 2008, Pinkard was a founding member of Seminary of the Street in Oakland, Calif. Among its activities, Seminary of the Street executes “liturgical direct actions,” such as when it bloodied the Alameda County Courthouse steps with red paint on Good Friday to call attention to the imperial violence of the criminal justice system.

Like Lydon, Pinkard, now in North Carolina, counsels us to resist the cheap, bloody catharsis that the criminal justice system cynically dubs “healing.” Rather than find false consolation in the suffering of “the guilty,” Pinkard encourages us to sit with our despair. There we can begin the arduous labor of bringing “love and tenderness to ungrieved losses, relational estrangement, [and] internalized oppression.” In time, Pinkard says, “We begin to form coalitions to make structural changes—meaningful work that pays a living wage, community safety patrols to replace police presence, restorative justice processes.” This is a spirit of abolition that inheres in everyday practices of survival and healing, repair and resistance.

In Philadelphia, we spoke with Kempis “Ghani” Songster, who was sentenced to life without parole at the age of 15. In 2016, the Supreme Court held that juveniles sentenced to life without the possibility of parole must be eligible for release, and Songster knew that his hour of freedom might soon be at hand. Songster saw a problem. Violent crime is largely horizontal, with harmers and the harmed coming from the same communities, but the state’s adversarial system pits community members against each other in a zero-sum game.

“Part of political action,” according to Songster, must be “healing action.” Too often, he laments, this aspect of abolition has been ignored. Songster looked to Africa

for models of post-conflict justice, to the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa and community-based Gacaca courts in Rwanda. In 2016, while still incarcerated, Songster co-organized an event that brought together newly paroled former juvenile lifers and the families of those victimized by violent crime. Drawing on the Gacaca model, men who had killed were afforded the opportunity to admit what they did, to apologize for what they did, to seek forgiveness, and to explore possibilities of atonement. They were invited to pledge to become agents of change in their community. No longer incarcerated, Songster continues his work with Ubuntu Philadelphia as well as with the Abolitionist Law Center and the Amistad Law Project.

A STUBBORN PURSUIT

Abolitionist dreams begin where impossibility leaves off. As agents of the most transformative social movement in our country’s history, the 19th-century abolitionists are also an enduring, if malleable, archetype. As Andrew Delbanco ambivalently characterized them in his 2012 book *The Abolitionist Imagination*, abolitionists represent “a recurrent American phenomenon: a determined minority sets out, in the face of long odds, to rid the world of what it regards as a patent and entrenched evil.” As incarcerated journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal puts it, “Abolitionists are, simply put, those beings who look out upon their time and say, ‘No.’”

The will to abolish is what comes forth when pessimism about the possibility for effecting justice hits rock bottom and careers back up in the form of righteous fury.

Whereas reform begins with the essentially secular stuff of data and policy, abolitionism plumbs a deeper, more soulful well. Whereas the call to “end mass incarceration” is merely quantitative, the call to abolish prisons is qualitative. This shift is mobilizing, righteous, and corrective: The problem isn’t merely that there are too many people confined to American cages; the problem is the cage itself. As a moral abomination, even one caged person—adult or child, white or Black, documented or undocumented, “innocent” or “guilty”—would be too many.

If prison reform requires new policy proposals, prison abolition necessitates fundamental changes in the ways we understand justice and injustice, harm and

accountability, entitlement and obligation. At its most progressive, reform aspires to improve conditions, rehabilitate offenders, reduce recidivism, and shrink prison populations—all the while conceding that “public safety,” a notion deeply entwined with the logic of mass incarceration, is a condition achieved through the proper administration of state violence. Abolitionism refuses these languages and instead insists on principles, on absolutes, and on truths, in stubborn pursuit of a world without prisons. ✦

Joshua Dubler and Vincent W. Lloyd are the authors of *Break Every Yoke: Religion, Justice, and the Abolition of Prisons*, from which this article draws.





SET THE PRISONERS FREE

Jesus' inaugural sermon was based on the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me ... to proclaim release to the prisoners" (Luke 4:18). Christians for the Abolition of Prisons use this as a founding text. But what *is* a "prison abolitionist"? It's someone who believes that prisons have failed their role in public safety, does not support reforms that strengthen or legitimate the prevailing prison system, and advocates for the end of incarceration as a long-term goal. Prison-abolition advocates seek to demythologize imprisonment or "caging" as an effective or moral response for maintaining public safety. Abolition is an end goal—we have to open up space in our civic imagination to engage new, more effective, and more humane approaches to law-breaking. Prison abolition, like "defunding the police," focuses on a massive change in mindset, priorities, and budget allocations. Here are six elements of the prison abolition movement.

1. Diminish and dismantle the system of punishment through caging, recognizing that there will always need to be a few people who must be separated from society for a period of time.

2. Establish a moratorium on prison and jail construction at all levels of governance; outlaw private prisons.

3. Decarcerate: Enact and support sentencing-reform laws such as the Fair Sentencing Act and First Step Act, diversion programs, mental health treatment, early-release programs for nonviolent crimes, and strict prison-capacity limits.

4. Excarcerate: Impose consequences other than incarceration, such as fines, restorative justice, victim restitution, training, pre-arrest and pretrial diversion programs, alternative sentencing, home-based electronic monitoring, and electronic parole check in.

5. Create new responses to crimes with victims, particularly sexual violence, violent street crime, and child abuse.

6. Restrain the few: Individuals who exhibit persistent patterns of violence require restraint or limited movement for specific periods of their lives. This should be a method of last resort and will require funding to develop small, local, communal restraining centers with highly trained staff whose goal is humane rehabilitation.

—By Rose Marie Berger

**Community
organizers are
testing prototypes
that could prefigure
an abolitionist
future.**

CULTIVA

'EXTRON

MYSTIC

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**How pilgrimages can
open our imagination
and help us walk away
from empire.**

By Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

F

For ages, those living as monks, cloistered nuns, hermits, and wandering pilgrims have mastered the art of turning loneliness into solitude, creating a real presence to themselves, and to God. These spiritual explorers were often confined—as many of us are now—into narrow spaces, yet pilgrimage to the authentic self explores an interior landscape. The exterior pilgrimage often reflects the interior path of spiritual imagination conducted in confinement. Their lessons and practices are not cloistered today; they offer liberating tools that can resurrect and protect the space for real presence for all who desire detachment from the omnipresence of screens. Simply consider this: You can't walk on unexpected pathways while looking at screens.

UNTETHERED FROM NORMALCY

Pilgrims move in two directions at the same time—an outward direction toward a holy destination and an inward journey seeking an encounter with the sacred. Two of the best academic scholars of pilgrimages, Victor and Edith Turner, explain it in this one sentence: “Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage.”

Pilgrimages, they suggest, were, and are, no walk in the park, or plain, or mountain. Embarking on such a journey, we become untethered not just from our physical normalcy. These uncertain, trusting steps also move us out of our spiritual familiarity. The pilgrim is invited not only to walk out

of boxes of dogmatic beliefs but also to walk away from practices of comfortable spirituality.

Consider historically the life of peasants or serfs in medieval Europe who were tied to a specific place—a manor, and a particular piece of land. Religious life was likewise confined to a local parish, with its repeated, routine practices. As pilgrimage opportunities began to be possible for a wide range of people, their journeys liberated them toward places unknown, with spiritual intensity. Pilgrimage sites were places where miracles had occurred. The bones of saints were living; the apparition of Mary created a rarified space. Healings occurred, continuing the miraculous nature of these sites.

As journeys to Jerusalem became insurmountable or impossible, numerous pilgrimage sites sprang forth throughout Europe. Yet those embarking on pilgrimages faced clear and present dangers. They were walking into liminal space, with a familiar past of place and spirit left behind and a future promise of spiritual power, wedded to tangible, material things, in the distance.

In their own context, this was a reckless spirituality, a form of extroverted mysticism. Of course, the underbelly of pilgrimage motives can't be ignored—those seeking indulgences, or paid to travel on behalf of a wealthy, sedentary sinner, or those sentenced to a pilgrimage as recompense for a crime. But for most, this was a once-in-a-lifetime, embodied quest of spiritual abandonment. In the words of the Turners, “pilgrimage was the great liminal experience of the religious life.”

REJECTING MODERNITY'S EXPECTATIONS

For today's pilgrim it can be the same. A pilgrimage is a rejection of modernity's expectations and assumptions about time, place, perception, satisfaction, speed, predictability, and the material world. As in ancient times, motives for contemporary pilgrimages are mixed. Lines between pilgrimage and tourism become blurred for some, while breaks in employment prompt others to a pilgrimage more than a thirst for embodied forms of holiness. Yet pathways that move simultaneously in inward and outward directions prove irresistible to throngs roaming pilgrimage paths today.

The most popular guide to the Camino de Santiago, one of the world's best-known pilgrimage networks, is written by John Brierley. It's the closest thing to

a Bible that many pilgrims carry. Brierley breaks the Camino into segments that can be walked each day (though many dispute his assumptions about distance and endurance). The villages and sites are carefully recounted, with suggestions for pilgrim lodging and food.

Starting each of these 33 stages, he recounts “the practical path” and then “the mystical path.” For instance, going from Molinaseca to Villafranca del Bierzo in Spain, reflecting on the story of the Templar's castle ruins in Ponferrada, he asks, “Are we ready for a leap of faith, ready to withdraw our investments in the limited consensual reality and bank instead on Reality unlimited?” Such interrogation of the soul, prompted by the places, shrines, and thousand-year-old stories of the Camino, confront the cloistered, secure patterns of spirituality that the pilgrim brings to the journey and can learn to leave behind. Again, to quote the Turners' *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*:

A pilgrim is one who divests [oneself] of the mundane concomitants of religion—which become entangled with its practice in the local situation—to confront in a special, “far” milieu, the basic elements and structures of...faith in their unshielded, virgin radiance.

In my experience, mysticism has always involved movement. That's not like the unique whirling dervishes' mystical prayers practiced for 700 years by the Sufi branch of Islam, although that is a fascinating study. Rather, simply walking, mindful of God's presence, helps walk me away from inherited forms of spiritual practice.

My previous acts of faith devotion included almost solely reading a passage of scripture and silently praying, generally asking God to do certain things. What is changed by walking is focus. My focus is on presence—beginning regularly with the simple attempt to bring my inner self present to the reality of God's love, which already and always is there, in each breath, and each step, upholding my life.

In one way or another, the Spirit yearns to break out and to break open our old practices, our protective shells of comfortable spirituality, connecting our inner selves more deeply to God's love and to God's world. Your soul no longer stays still. It's moving with God in the world, and moving toward God, revealed in signs or shrines or saints or surroundings. The pilgrim's walking body holds incarnate this inner journey of the soul, often recklessly.

CONFRONTING AN OPPRESSIVE ORDER

St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, Germany, has an 800-year history, including when Johann Sebastian Bach served as choirmaster from 1723 to 1750. Listening to the Bach compositions played on the church organ there in the summer of 2017 brought his long legacy of music to life for me. But the service was being held to commemorate another period of St. Nicholas' history—its crucial role in the fall of the East German Communist regime.

Monday evening prayer services started in the 1980s in this famous downtown Lutheran church. Though kept under surveillance by the omnipresent East German police, the Stasi, the church was one of the few places offering a protected haven for gathering, reflection, and discussion, as well as worship and prayer. The Monday evening prayer services opened a space for conversation about human rights, democratic aspirations, and a yearning for social and political change, along with studying the Sermon on the Mount and biblical themes of justice and social righteousness.

By 1989, these prayer meetings had begun to swell, filling the church, even as the disaffection of East Germans with their regime was yearning for expression. On Oct. 9 of that year, thousands gathered at the church, overflowing its pews and narrow balconies. Following the prayer service, they processed, armed only with candles. Thousands more joined them in the city center, moving in procession, confronting reinforced lines of riot police. But marching by candlelight requires one hand to hold the candle, and the other to protect it against wind and keep it burning. No one could carry anything threatening violence.

The gathering and procession of between 70,000 and 100,000 people was the largest one of its kind in East German history. The riot police had no response for prayerful, nonviolent marchers armed only with candles. They gave way, allowing the procession to go forward. More candlelight processions ensued throughout the country, and the courage of people's public action increased. Just one month later, the Berlin Wall fell. Most agree that the prayer service and candlelight processions beginning at St. Nicholas Church were a pivotal step in events that led eventually to the fall of the East German regime.

A detached space had been provided by St. Nicholas Church for the inner spiritual preparation, clarity of vision, and commit-

ment required for these East Germans willing to begin walking away, publicly, from their empire.

While pilgrimages can be described as going to a holy place, they are also steps made with a holy purpose. Seventy thousand or more marchers walking courageously around the Leipzig ring road were modern pilgrims whose steps became a public and political witness. Guided only by candles on an uncertain way forward, they were leaving behind a corrupt, oppressive political and economic order.

ACTS OF PUBLIC WITNESS

Walking on pilgrimages shaped by a holy purpose, and addressing stark injustices, ecological threats, racism, and violence all sustained by contemporary imperial power, has become in recent years a frequent avenue of witness and action. Beyond talking and writing, people want to walk in ways that embody their convictions and reveal the realities they wish to confront. The immigration crisis on the U.S. border with Mexico has witnessed numerous cross-border pilgrimages designed for this purpose.

One such dramatic pilgrimage in 2016, *El Camino del Inmigrante*, moved from the Tijuana/San Diego border 150 miles north to downtown Los Angeles, dramatically highlighting the need to address the

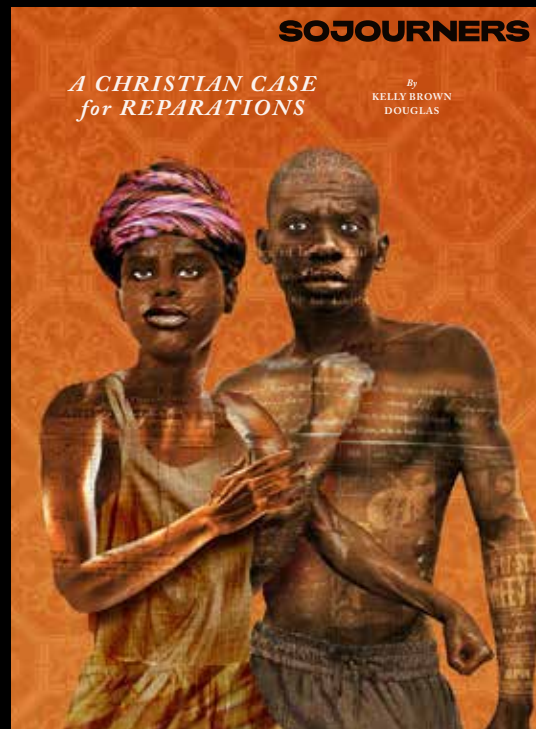
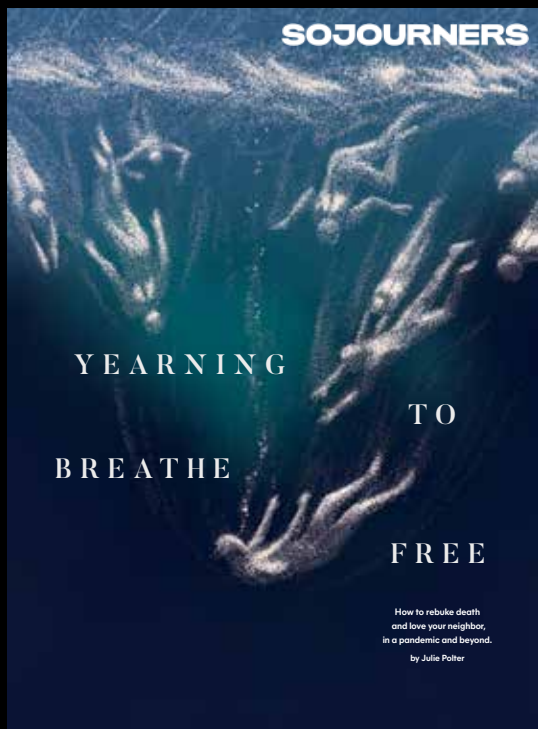
injustices of the broken immigration system. Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, one of the key organizers, said, "In the Camino, we are seeing so many people who are being moved by the Spirit to join the cause of justice; I believe it is God's moment for change to occur."

The witness of pilgrimages can initiate changes in society. As the popularity of pilgrimages continues to grow in our time, the danger is that they will become a new way for people to seek privatized spiritual experience.

But pilgrimages are acts of public witness, where our feet do the talking. We are not walking for ourselves. Rather, like Celtic pilgrims without oars, our stepping into the boat is a surrender to the currents of God's love. That love beckons us to leave the empire behind for the promise of a divine reign of justice, healing, and peace. Whatever our holy destination, our walking itself opens pathways toward a liberating future intended by the Creator. ✕

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson is a *Sojourners* contributing editor and former general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. This article is adapted from *Without Oars: Casting Off Into a Life of Pilgrimage* (Broadleaf Books, November 2020).

THE PILGRIM'S WALKING BODY HOLDS INCARNATE THE INNER JOURNEY OF THE SOUL, OFTEN RECKLESSLY.



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SOJOURNERS

SONGS ABOUT JESUS SHOW UP IN DISCOS, HONKY-TONKS, BLUES BARS, AND STRIP CLUBS.



I

It's almost December, and in a few weeks we may gather with our families (potentially via Zoom) to sing "Away in a Manger" and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Each of these songs depicts baby Jesus in a different way, from a poor, defenseless child to a newborn king. Each contributes to our faith in

a different way. That tiny baby reminds us of Jesus' humanity and his solidarity with the poor, while the incarnated Lord reminds us of God's splendor and glory.

From these hymns to the latest Hillsong chorus, most songs about Jesus have been written by Christians for their fellow believers. Over the past 50 years, however, this has changed. Songs about Jesus no longer

Music

show up just in church, but also in discos, honky-tonks, blues bars, and strip clubs. Over the past 50 years, Jesus has appeared in hundreds of songs in every secular genre. These artists explore in their own unique ways the question that Jesus asked his disciples: "And who do you say that I am?"

Unsurprisingly, their answers are often provocative and unorthodox. Some songs reimagine Jesus as Black, Korean, female, or gay. Some depict him as a soldier, a presidential candidate, a cowboy, or a football player. Others compare him to



John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Hank Williams Jr., and even Hitler.

Though most of these will never appear in our hymnals, that doesn't mean they aren't important to us as Christians. Written by artists unafraid of excommunication or execution, these songs often speak with powerful prophetic voices that we need to hear. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jesus, they carry messages that have crucial importance for contemporary Christians.

The first is that we don't have a trademark on the identity and meaning of Jesus. In fact, the variety of ways that Jesus appears in these songs reminds us that his meaning has always been complex, highly contested, and inseparable from the structures of power that have dominated the Christian tradition. Because these songs give voice to individuals and communities that have rarely been invited to the theological table, there is no escaping their political ramifications. In songs such as The Game's "Jesus Piece," Lil B's "Look Like Jesus," and Nas' "The Cross," rappers identify themselves with Jesus in order to claim his power. They challenge the values of humility and meekness given to them by an oppressive society. At the same time they reclaim Jesus' role (and theirs) as an outlaw: a preacher, revolutionary, and martyr who died for the truth, ultimately triumphing over the "haters."

In country songs such as James Otto's "Soldiers and Jesus," Clay Walker's "Jesus Was a Country Boy," Johnny Cash's "The Greatest Cowboy of Them All," and even Carrie Underwood's crossover smash "Jesus, Take the Wheel," Jesus embodies the values of rural, white, politically and socially conservative evangelicalism. He is a humble, down-home boy who loves his mama, his church, and his country. In punk and metal songs such as Bad Religion's "American Jesus," Jello Biafra's "Jesus Was a Terrorist," and Metallica's "Leper Messiah," Jesus appears as a foil for the values of independent thinking and personal authenticity that are central to both genres. He is either a false preacher, a misguided lunatic, or a misunderstood teacher who has tragically inspired millions of weak-minded followers.

All of us can recognize ourselves in these songs, and it's sometimes discomfiting. Who among us has not thought

that our Jesus is the real Jesus, or even the right Jesus? These songs keep us from the dangerous temptation to re-create Jesus in our own image.

These songs also speak to us prophetically by keeping us accountable. During the greatest period of secularization in our country's history, they reflect back to us the Jesus that we Christians have shown others. And like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, they fearlessly compare the words we purport to live by with the world we have created.

The results are not pretty. Song after song calls out Christians for our sins: a world of violence, death, greed, racism, jingoism, and environmental catastrophe. Songs such as Johnny Cash's "Jesus Was a Carpenter," Ben Folds' "Jesusland," Ray Stevens' "Would Jesus Wear a Rolex," Jordy Searcy's "Explaining Jesus," and Green Day's "East Jesus Nowhere" represent the work of disparate artists in a variety of genres who are unafraid to tell Christians what we need to hear.

Among these sins is the one that secular artists—and the prophets themselves—have considered especially heinous: hypocrisy. Ironically, however, this is the charge that reminds us of Jesus' enduring truth. Prophetic power comes from speaking the truth, and by convicting Christians of hypocrisy, secular artists actually bear witness to the Jesus of love, peace, and justice whom we Christians wish we could better serve. Despite the sins of his followers, then, these secular artists have still encountered that Jesus. This is an extraordinary example of "common grace" and another way to conceptualize our claim that Jesus is the Living Word.

As we make resolutions for the new year, let's pray that our Christian witness will reveal to others the Jesus we claim to follow. But if it doesn't, we can be sure we will hear about it. ✕

**BY CONVICTING
CHRISTIANS
OF HYPOCRISY,
SECULAR
ARTISTS
ACTUALLY BEAR
WITNESS TO
JESUS.**

Delvyn Case is a musician, scholar, and professor in Boston. Information about his research on secular songs about Jesus may be found at delvyncase.com.

On Screen

New & Noteworthy

LIMITED FANTASY

By Da'Shawn Mosley

Everything that the devil stole, HBO's giving back to me. That's a sacrilegious statement, but sometimes that's how I feel when I'm on my couch watching yet another show with a largely Black cast (and sometimes even crew) miraculously greenlit in a sea of Hollywood whiteness by the network titan that years ago gave us *The Wire* and made many of us notice the likes of Idris Elba.

For what seemed like eons to Black folks eager for visual confirmation that their lives mattered, Black characters on TV were mostly relegated to sidekick or background roles—and Black writers, directors, and showrunners were rare or entirely absent. But from *Insecure* to *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, *Watchmen* to *I May Destroy You*, HBO is perhaps the strongest ally for revolutionary Black artists and creators of color on and behind TV.

It's because of HBO's commitment to showing up that I'm able to watch *Lovecraft Country*, a mystery-horror-supernatural drama set in the 1950s, helmed by the Black woman writer Misha Green and starring the relative newcomer Jonathan Majors (*The Last Black Man in San Francisco*) and the already-a-screen-legend-at-age-34 Jurnee Smollett (*Eve's Bayou*). Focused on a young Korean War vet nicknamed Tic (Atticus) and a prodigal daughter who goes by Leti (Letitia), *Lovecraft* follows what happens when Tic's father goes missing and Tic, Leti, and Tic's uncle leave in search of him, despite the threat of white people who wish them ill.

Speaking of racist souls, you're right to hear *Love-*

craft Country and think of the horror pioneer H.P. Lovecraft, who changed American storytelling but also said in favor of lynching Black people, "anything is better than the mongrelisation which would mean the hopeless deterioration of a great nation." Partially set in a fictional town called Ardhams, Mass., a nod to the town of Arkham that H.P. fashioned for many of his stories, *Lovecraft Country* has monsters and dangers like those Lovecraft dreamed up, but extends that limited fantasy to include the large realness of Black life.

The first two episodes of *Lovecraft Country* are beyond excellent; its third is not as strong (although it features, to the tune of "Take It Back" by the gospel singer Dorinda Clark-Cole, a badass act of Black resistance). But white artists have long been allowed to flounder and find their footing, been given myriad chances to "make 'fetch' happen." Now more Black visionaries are being given that same opportunity—radical racial justice that probably has hell quaking in fury. I just hope God doesn't let Satan take any of it away. ❖

Da'Shawn Mosley is associate editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

WONDERFULLY MADE

Phillip Picardi, former editor of the LGBTQ magazine *Out*, looks into the intricacies of religion in his podcast *Unholier Than Thou*. From harsh treatment of Muslims by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to exploring the sacred role of trans people in some religious traditions, Picardi calls for good-hearted faith.

Crooked Media



Phillip Picardi of the *Unholier Than Thou* podcast.



Shall Not Be Sold

Appallingly, around the world many people are making money from grueling asylum processes. *Asylum for Sale: Profit and Protest in the Migration Industry*, edited by Siobhán McGuirk and Adrienne Pine, assembles words of resistance from journalists, activists, academics, and especially asylum seekers proposing more humane visions of asylum.

PM Press



One Body

Filled with sharp, moving verse and persona poems in the voice of America's best-known civil rights activist, *Raising King* by Joseph Ross channels the ethos of Martin Luther King Jr. for a year filled with racial injustice, immoral leadership, and death.

Willow Books

PRIVACY, BOUGHT AND SOLD

By
Danny Duncan
Collum

**FORMER TECH INDUSTRY
INSIDERS SAY: DISABLE
NOTIFICATIONS AND NEVER
TAKE RECOMMENDATIONS.**



Eyes & Ears

The past decade has seen an endless trickle of negative stories about social media—data breaches, Russian bots, cyberbullying, digital radicalization, etc.—so by now almost everyone knows that the amusement and convenience

those platforms offer come with a downside. But now a new Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, is here to tell us one big thing: It's worse than we thought. In fact, it's worse than we could have possibly imagined.

In the film this alarm is raised by many of the very people who helped create the systems they now decry. We're talking about the guy who invented the "Like" button for Facebook, the guy who designed the recommendation engine for YouTube, the fellow who invented the infinite scroll. One after another these mostly white, mostly male characters come on camera to tell us how badly their proudest accomplishments have gone awry.

The big problem these folks warn us about is that our smartphones constantly collect data (what we buy, what music we play, where we are, who we talk to, etc., ad nauseam) and that data is used to fuel a system of targeted alerts, notifications, and recommendations designed to keep us on a site for as long as possible and deliver us to advertisers who also have that data about us.

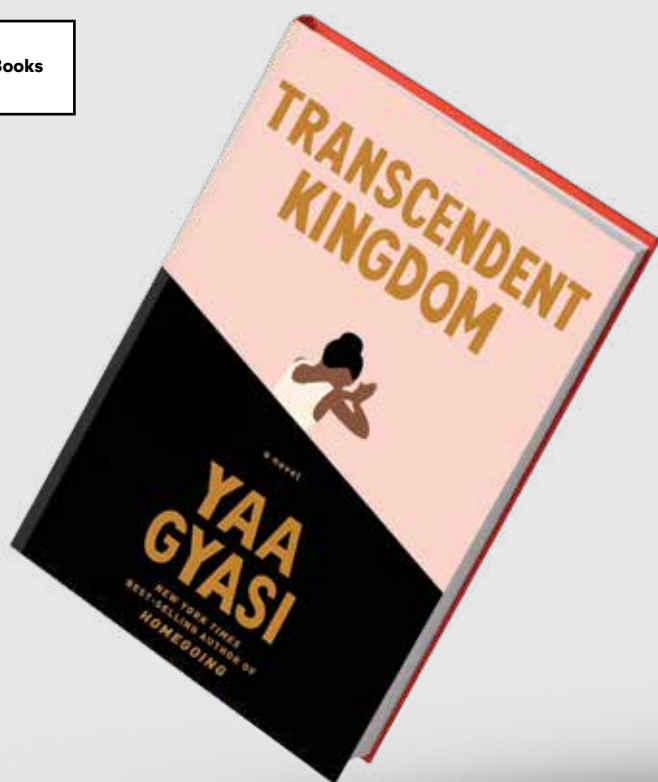
We see this system at work in those omnipresent targeted online ads for something we looked at yesterday. But, as bad as

the advertising is, the side effects are even worse. According to *The Social Dilemma*, since around 2010 (when smartphones started becoming ubiquitous) self-harm and suicide, especially among young teenage girls, has gone up drastically. Facebook was used to provoke the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people in Myanmar. Of the people who joined extremist and hate groups on Facebook, 64 percent did so not because they went looking for bad actors, but because Facebook's algorithm steered them there.

At the end of the movie, all the former tech industry insiders are asked, "What should people do about social media?" All of them say disable all notifications and never take recommendations. Most of them say keep your kids away from it for as long as possible, at least until 16. One of them says tax all data transactions to make the tech companies pay some of the social costs.

These are all good ideas, as far as they go, but I'm with Shoshana Zuboff (author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*), who tells her interviewer that the business of selling personal data to advertisers should simply be banned, the way we've banned the buying and selling of human beings and human organs. If we did that, social media could still do the good it does, such as provide a digital infrastructure for human connections, but it would have to settle for the money from nontargeted general audience ads or go to a subscription model. And the rest of us would have to ask our own questions, think our own thoughts, and seek out for ourselves the information we really want to know. ❖

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.



**IF A DEAD MAN COULD BE
CALLED BACK TO LIFE, THEN
WHY CAN'T A MOTHER
RISE FROM BED?**

the present? At 28, Gifty's life is lonely lab work and rumination, a mother unresponsive save for her hum, a father so distant he is not called by name. Even when Gifty is silent, the past reverberates loudly in her relationships. If she can find answers to her research questions, perhaps one day someone could be saved from the throes of addiction. But who will save her?

Answers to experiments are not enough. She reaches back to a time when she wanted above all to be "good" because "goodness" promised reward: when she addressed her letters to God, when she attempted to "pray without ceasing," when her white neighbors celebrated her brother's prowess on the field, when the same neighbors revealed their faith was exclusionary, when she walked up to the altar and experienced the euphoria of salvation, when her brother was not only alive but thriving.

As she watches her mother in bed, Gifty contemplates the mysteries of faith, God, and relationships. What is prayer? What happens to Lazarus after Jesus brings him back to life? If a dead man could be called back to life, then

why can't a mother rise from bed? "When it came to God," Gifty says. "I could not give a straight answer. I had not been able to give a straight answer since the day Nana died. ... And yet. How to explain that quiver? How to explain that sure-footed knowledge of his presence in my heart?"

While preparing to host her ailing mother, Gifty realizes that she does not own a Bible and decides to get one because "it nagged at me to think of her reaching for one and not being able to find it." Later, she reflects on how the Greek Logos lends new meaning to John 1: "In the beginning, there was an idea, a premise; there was a question."

In *Transcendent Kingdom*, Yaa Gyasi shows that in the darkness of loss, there can be great meaning in the searching. ✦

Elinam Agbo holds an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' Program. Born in Ghana, she grew up in the U.S. Midwest.

WE WILL ALL BE CHANGED

Transcendent Kingdom,
by Yaa Gyasi
Knopf

In the novel *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gifty is a doctoral candidate in neuroscience at Stanford University, aiming to identify the neural pathways that suppress reward-seeking behavior. She is at the lab trying to keep two mice from tearing each other apart when her mother's pastor calls. Gifty's mother is sick, severely depressed ever since her son, Gifty's brother Nana, died of a heroin overdose. Now, years later, Gifty wants nothing more than to bring her mother back to life.

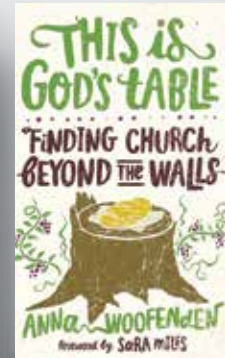
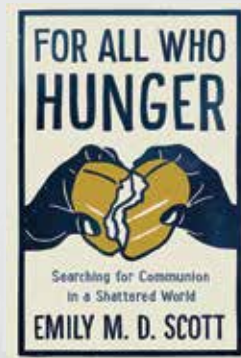
In her second book, author Yaa Gyasi continues to grapple with familial loss and inheritance. But while her debut novel *Homeroom* examined the legacy of slavery, *Transcendent Kingdom* follows a young woman as she recalls her immigrant family's triumphs alongside their devastating fight with depression and addiction. Through her methodical (scientific, spiritual, and philosophical) inquiry, Gifty tries to keep their memories alive.

What happens when the past haunts and overwhelms

TACTILE
FAITH

For All Who Hunger:
Searching for Communion in a
Shattered World, by Emily M. D. Scott,
and This Is God's Table:
Finding Church Beyond the Walls,
by Anna Woofenden

Convergent Books, Herald Press



Long before the coronavirus inspired congregations to gather outside of a sanctuary, Emily M.D. Scott and Anna Woofenden birthed congregations (St. Lydia's Dinner Church in Brooklyn, N.Y., and the Garden Church in San Pedro, Calif., respectively) that shed pageantry and focused on the basics: bread, cup, and looking-a-person-deep-in-the-eye connection.

Around a dinner table and in an urban garden, these two scrappy congregations grew through environmental disasters (Hurricane Sandy and a multiyear California drought), confrontations with external and internal classism and racism, and the joys and griefs of bringing a new vision of *ekklesia* into the world.

It is rare to see the tangled roots of a church plant. Yet, both authors share insecurities about failed worship services, unstable budgets, and the long loneliness that comes with church leadership. The vivid character development, precise detail, and theological depth of both narratives make the reader feel at home in the possibility of worship beyond pew-lined sanctuaries.

Woofenden's narrative has two foundations: her Swedenborgian heritage's call to see God anew in each generation, and the undeniable connection between the soil of the earth and the soul of God. Meanwhile, Scott brings to life the people of St. Lydia's with such detail that the reader can smell the rosemary Communion bread.

Whatever or wherever church may be in the future (post-pandemic future and also heaven-future), these two books show God coming alive in communities when people are invited to move their hands along with their spirits. Whether washing dishes in a soapy basin after a communal meal or using a garden hoe to plant tomatoes, when our physical hands move, our souls more easily connect. Woofenden quotes her grandfather, also a minister, who understood this embodied faith: "Love, by its very nature, must be doing something."

Both authors ultimately departed the communities

they planted, leaving them to bloom on their own under new leadership. Finishing the final chapters of both narratives, I held the grief of Scott and Woofenden tightly. Just as it was difficult for both pastors to leave, it was hard for me to walk away from the people of St. Lydia's and the Garden Church after getting to know them through the story of their becoming.

Scott paraphrases Flannery O'Connor in the introduction to her book: "If communion is symbolism, then to hell with it." Both these memoirs have convinced me that if the church is not offering people an invitation to use our hands (to plant, to paint, to bake, to create) then to hell with that too. ❖

Rev. Kaeley McEvoy is a writer, poet, and preacher. She is associate pastor of Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ in Bethesda, Md.

**"LOVE, BY ITS VERY
NATURE, MUST BE
DOING SOMETHING."**

THAT AWKWARD QUESTION

An excerpt from *Mixed Blessing*:
Embracing the Fullness of Your
Multiethnic Identity,
by Chandra Crane

IVP



“So what are you exactly?”

I’m asked that often. When people see my dark-black and curly hair, my somewhat “almond-shaped” eyes, my pale skin with a yellow undertone—and yet freckles—they wonder. They can’t place my ethnicity in a box, so they feel unsettled, maybe even threatened.

Depending on my mood, I choose one of a few answers. If I’m feeling sarcastic: “I’m human, thanks. And you?” Or if I’m feeling cryptic: “*Exotic*, obviously.” If I’m feeling sarcastic and preachy: “Me? I’m part of the Colossians 3:12 ‘Beloved Community,’ part of God’s people that he loves from the center of his being.”

I’ve also learned to play dumb, answering with my own question: “Oh, how do you mean? Are you asking about my Myers-Briggs personality profile or maybe my Enneagram?” Obviously, they aren’t. But hoping they’ll actually hear themselves, I like to make people say it: “No, what ethnicity are you? Where are you from? Why do you look so *different*?”

What ethnicity am I, indeed.

If I’m feeling patient, loving, and strong enough, I invite folks to hear my story. They’d better get comfortable, because it takes a while. When the Holy Spirit leads me in being gracious, I answer that awkward question by sharing about my Thai national birthfather and my European American mom. Then I share about my African American dad, who married my mom and adopted me when I was five. I talk about being a proud New Mexican—born and raised. I share about my first trip to Thailand, in my early thirties, to see my paternal birth family. I mention my multiethnic church family in Mississippi, the heart of the Deep South. ✕

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Photo of Louisville Seminary DMin student Fr. John Pozhathuparambil courtesy of The Record newspaper.

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SOJOURNERS

THE INNKEEPER'S WIFE

By Kenneth Steven



I reckon it was the girl,
not more than fourteen. Those eyes.

Something made him stop his talk,
hoist down the lantern and mutter out with them.

And that was one sour night—
dust and wind, things banging;

folk still wandering the town like ghosts
and hammering the doors.

Our place was loud with coins and drink,
and this was long past midnight.

It wasn't him that came back somehow,
that's all I'll say—I can't explain.

It was as though he'd seen something,
as though his eyes were somewhere else.

The first spear of light next day and he was out
with that fresh pail of milk—

and he would not say where he was going.

Kenneth Steven is a Scottish writer, poet, and retreat leader whose work is steeped in Celtic Christianity and the spirituality of Iona.

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BUILDING THE COMMONWEALTH OF GOD

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle B.

By Valerie Bridgeman



Living the Word

We have come through a turbulent year in which health concerns, weather concerns, social unrest concerns, and more have been at the center of our thoughts. From the first time we heard

“COVID-19” to the last storm of hurricane season to the deaths of many significant cultural icons in the U.S., we have found ourselves reeling—or at least I have, and so have many people I know.

Advent and the beginning of the Christmas season give us an opportunity to recalibrate and take a breath. We are into the new Christian calendar, and for Christians that reality should mean something. Expectation, hope, joy, and peace are just some of the Christian ways of leaning into life. Advent allows us to flex those faith muscles. And we need them, because, as the texts for the first days of Christmastide notes, the struggle under which we live does not dissipate. We live our Christian faith most often amid social crises. “Calm” and “peace” are aspirational at best. The reflections for this month try to make sense of how we flex those muscles I mentioned earlier. How do we participate in God’s desire for us to live together in just, holy, equitable ways? How do we hold ourselves and each other accountable to building the commonwealth of God, in which we each play our part, great or small, so that all are made whole?

Valerie Bridgeman is dean, vice president of academic affairs, and an associate professor of homiletics and Hebrew Bible at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

ADVENT TEACHES US WAYS OF LEANING INTO LIFE.

DECEMBER 6

HOPE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

ISAIAH 40:1-11; PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13;
2 PETER 3:8-15A; MARK 1:1-8

This second Sunday of Advent, as we focus on hope, I can hear in my mind Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s voice as I read Isaiah 40:4-5. This text is layered in good memories for me. But as I was preparing to write for this Advent season, a friend said to me, “I am feeling hopeless.” In the midst of a persistent global pandemic that has come with a fair amount of impatience and impertinence in the U.S., I understood my friend’s despair. However, the readings this Sunday encourage hope, the stubborn quality that believes in God’s persistent grace toward humans, no matter our failings. One of my favorite quotes about hope is from Bishop Yvette A. Flunder, presiding prelate of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. She declares, “We are obligated to hope.” Hope is not wishful thinking, but an assurance that God is constant when people are not (40:6-8).

Most days I believe Bishop Flunder that our Christian faith leads us to hope. But the prophet Isaiah understood that hope could only proceed from God’s comfort. Sometimes, during turmoil and struggle, we need someone to “speak tenderly” to us, as the prophet says God commanded regarding ancient Israel. In a time of deep angst and despair for many, in a time of great loss over a sustained period, those who are obligated to this godly hope are encouraged to say, “Here is your God” (verse 9). As we absorb this hope for ourselves, individually and communally, we also are obligated to clear the path for others to experience hope, or, in the words of the prophet, “to prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (verse 3). What does that kind of construction look like when we seem more interested in barriers between us than leveling the ground so that everyone can travel, no matter their physical

or spiritual abilities (verse 4)? I have no answers; I have only a deep assurance, a hope, that God will equip us for that work.

DECEMBER 13

JUSTICE-FUELED JOY

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; LUKE 1:46-55;

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24;

JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

Joy, my mother often said, is based in God—not in what’s happening around you. I have lived with this idea since I was a child. I wish I could remember why my mother thought it necessary to give this definition to her children. I wonder about her words as I read Isaiah. It seems clear that for the prophet, joy is bestowed on people because of God, yes, but also because of the circumstances around the people changing. The garments of salvation (61:10) follow the prophetic actions in which oppressed people receive good news; brokenhearted people have their wounds tended; those captive—and here I would imagine captive in any way, from oppressive systems, unjust countries, addictions, and more—are liberated; and prisoners are freed (verse 1). Can’t you hear the cheers arising from those set free under all these conditions?

But wait! There’s more. The prophet proclaims a jubilee (the year of God’s favor), which for ancient Israel included freedom from unbearable debt and setting slaves free, too. It included providing for widows and orphans, for example, “those who mourn in Zion” (verse 3). It would be easy to think this call for provision is poetic and doesn’t demand anything of those who are in leadership or who claim to love God. But if you know anything about the prophetic literature, you know prophets usually are literalists when it comes to caring for the least among them.

Looking ahead, you see these commitments in the song that Mary sings in Luke 1:46-55, which includes the “reversal of fortune” theme. Some may believe it’s harsh to suggest that the rich will turn away empty; after all, why can’t we just all be among the “haves,” right? I think the joy of the exploited in the song, in which they rejoice in what has been visited on them being turned on their oppressors, is a call to repentance and empathy, fueled by God’s justice. And, maybe in this Advent season, that justice is what will bring us all joy.

DECEMBER 20

CHRISTMAS IS COMING

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16; PSALM 89:1-4,

19-26; ROMANS 16:25-27; LUKE 1:26-38

It’s the Sunday before Christmas. This last Advent Sunday reminds us that we are called to peace. But this Gregorian calendar year, the end of which is in sight, has been anything but peaceful. We have come through a difficult year rife with turmoil and dissent, with no unity of which to speak. I have wondered how we will ever find an equilibrium that includes justice, since I don’t believe peace is possible without justice. A cessation of strife does not necessarily mean people have come to good will.

Reading the gospel lesson, I was reminded that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in turbulent times, a time when ancient Israel longs for deliverance. A young child (probably no more than 12 or 13 years old) has this visitation of “favor.” But the message, though she must bear it, is not for her alone. She will be vulnerable in every way so that God might provide for the people a king to sit on the Davidic throne. An upended life in time of turmoil is the answer for deliverance, and ultimately peace. I’m not particularly comforted by this revelation, except in this way: Peace isn’t always apparent when we yield to what we know God is calling forth from us, individually and collectively. But if it is true that “nothing is impossible with God”—and I believe it is—then yielding to the most absurd obedience is a part of it. For me that has meant praying for people not on my normal prayer list: people I disagree with politically, socially, and religiously. For me, these prayers have been as improbable as being impregnated by the Spirit was to Mary. When I find myself rendered distraught by the world around me, as I imagine Mary must have been, I remind myself that God works in and through chaos. It’s an odd way to find peace.

**“CALM” AND “PEACE” ARE
ASPIRATIONAL AT BEST.**

DECEMBER 27

REGULAR APPEARANCES

ISAIAH 61:10-62:3; PSALM 148;

GALATIANS 4:4-7; LUKE 2:22-40

What does it mean to embrace Christmastide as believers? Despite the fact that “two turtledoves” (Luke 2:24) might remind you of a familiar Christmas song, there are other reasons for this text, including that Simeon desired to see God’s salvation, here as the infant Jesus, the firstborn of Mary, being consecrated to God (verse 23). Every time I read this passage I’m struck by Simeon’s words. They are pointed and, in some ways, painful (“a sword will pierce your own soul too,” (verse 35). I can testify that my inner thoughts have been revealed by how I interact with Mary’s baby. One of the realities with which we are confronted regularly is that we don’t always speak the truth or act the truth. But when truth, wrapped in swaddling clothes or in gospel, meets us, our thoughts are made manifest by our actions. When someone says, “I’m not a mind reader,” they speak rightly. And yet, we “read” people’s minds daily by what they do. Our actions reveal our thinking; our behavior uncovers our motives, even when we are trying so hard to hide our inner thoughts. Our opposition to God’s plan for all creation shows up in the way we respond to this child—represented in the faces and lives of every child, especially the most vulnerable among us.

What if in this Christmas season we remind ourselves that Jesus appears regularly to us? What if we choose not to dismiss this scripture as “merely” a retelling of Jesus’ young life, but rather as a story that appears time and again, giving us an opportunity to both praise God and ponder how our inner thoughts manifest in how we relate to one another? Simeon and Anna were serving in the temple. Mary and Joseph were following the law. Each were interacting with God’s choice for salvation in the way they were called in that moment. May our inner thoughts be revealed so that we might serve God justly or change to do so. ✱

“Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF... SOMETHING

By Ed Spivey Jr.

Is the election over yet? Can I emerge from my dark cave of foreboding to the bright light of day, or have my worst fears been realized? I don't really have a cave, just a basement. And it's not so bad, since it has two reassuring packs of toilet paper to get me through the unknown that lies ahead. There's also a case of tuna, and several cans of beets procured, presumably, by a troubled family member who thinks sheltering in place means living with a red tongue and a sour disposition. Let's be honest: In these perilous times, you may need tuna, but nobody needs beets. (Pretzels would be good. But we don't have any of those.)

Speaking of safe places: I had planned to use this column as a smug refuge filled with sanctimony that I would fling at those on the losing side of an election that brought us to the precipice of authoritarianism. It was to be a preening and indulgent essay that we couldn't publish before the election because nonprofits like ours are forbidden from partisanship. (I felt so *sneaky*! I'm such an outlaw!) Unfortunately, after a careful check of the printing schedule, it turns out this issue might arrive in mailboxes before Nov. 3. So, it's a good thing I didn't say which side brought us to the precipice of authoritarianism. Because when it comes to authoritarianism, there are very fine people on both sides. (*Whew!* That was close!)

I already voted by mail, a good choice in this year of COVID, but it dulled my display of pride for participating in the democratic process. I didn't get an "I Voted" sticker. It's difficult to walk the streets reeking of self-important patriotism without that sticker. That sticker would say to all and sundry that I'm

I'M LOOKING AT THE WORLD THROUGH MY FINGERS. (MAKE IT STOP, PLEASE.)

a lover of democracy, a citizen steeped in integrity, a man of principle and action. And then I'd go back to my basement because democracy is getting scary out there. ("I Voted" stickers are not as obvious as the mark you get on Ash Wednesday. That "I'm deVoted" symbol is a more sober emblem, a powerful sign of devotion to an eternal faith, until somebody ruins the moment by pointing out you've got a smudge on your forehead.)

The results of this election probably won't be announced on the night of Election Day, and Americans will be looking to the media to monitor and report in a responsible way, beginning with wrapping Wolf Blitzer in duct tape to prevent him from premature postulation. Locking him in a storage closet is another idea to consider, where he could join a similarly stifled Karl Rove, who has his own blabby history of calling it too soon.

Because you can't rush the results of an election. There's too much at stake. You can rush an unproven vaccine, of course, with no downside other than the risk that most of the human race will turn into zombie cannibals. That happened in a Will Smith movie, where a heralded cancer cure didn't cure cancer, but definitely relieved the boredom of normal, non-zombie life. (Not that there's anything wrong with zombie cannibals, other than the fact they don't wear masks and refuse to social distance—it's hard to eat someone's brain from six feet away.) The movie is called *I Am Legend*, and the CDC definitely recommends you not watch it. Oh wait, now it's saying you should.

Come to think of it, elections are kind of like vaccines. They can cure the cause of our affliction—such as, say, the U.S. Senate—when it suffers from inflammation caused by hubris, or cough due to hypocrisy. As yet, we haven't reached herd immunity from such symptoms, so we'll need an injection of some kind. I'm thinking ... majority rule? ✱

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.



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